Flip the Switch: Virtue, Programming, and the Prospect of Automatic Agency in WALL•E

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ABSTRACT
Critiques of the Internet age often place technological change in contest with social virtues. This essay analyzes the 2008 Pixar film WALL•E to better understand how the interplay of these positions is presented in popular form. I argue the film reconciles this tension by framing virtues as both integral to living well with technology, and as a necessary ability of human beings. I refer to this framing as automatic agency. An agentic reading of WALL•E offers two points of interest for rhetorical critics. It highlights the drawbacks to narratives that rely on the agent-act ratio as public pedagogy, and draws attention to the tendency of framing virtues through the lens of mechanized technology rather than techne.

“We’ll see who’s powerless now.”
—Captain McCrea (WALL•E)

In its rationale to rescind prior prescriptions on screen exposure for toddlers, the American Academy of Pediatrics aptly identified a broader cultural transition afoot: “In a world where ‘screen time’ is becoming simply ‘time,’ our policies must evolve or become obsolete.” Public polling indicates the technical sphere of child rearing isn’t the only space where questions on living well with technology persist. A recent PEW survey found a plurality of respondents consider the prospect of continuously consuming information with devices or implants a “change for the worse” for society, even as such a future seems likely. These viewpoints illustrate the complex implications in assessing the Internet age. As Adam Gopnik clarifies, the “shifts in communication” that mark this moment are distinctive for being both “unprecedented” and “the big social revolution we live with.” For others, the Internet age—what Gopnik calls the “changes in mood, life, manners, feelings it creates” —fosters a competition between technology use and social virtues, making relevant debates on the loss of intimacy, loss of mental acuity, and loss of community, to name a few. Such a context provides a unique opportunity for messages that attempt to reconcile how to live well with technology.

Few popular texts are better positioned to negotiate this question than the 2008 Pixar film, WALL•E. Upon its release, critics rightly noticed how the film reflected resonant public concerns, with some even employing possessive pronouns to describe its narrative arc. A. O. Scott praised WALL•E as a “cinematic poem” that offers a “cartoon vision of our own potential extinction.” Bob Mondello saw the film as a “cautionary tale” within the then-burgeoning rise of mobile technology that warns against “getting so caught up in our gadgetry that we forget to look at the stars and take a back seat to romance.” While popular texts have long been sites for contemplating the relation between technological advancement and human values, WALL•E made this tension topical to the Internet age—a narrative formula extended in a legion of subsequent works, including: The Social
Network (2010), Her (2013), Ex Machina (2014), The Circle (2017), and the on-going anthology series, Black Mirror (2011—). Within this field of popular texts, though, WALL•E has remained a cultural heuristic for social questions of technology beyond its initial popular release, as evidenced in Amelia Tait’s 2016 observation that modern culture often seems matched to WALL•E’s plot; we are “living in Pixar’s future.”14 It isn’t just WALL•E’s relation to “archetypal’ aspects of our present” that make it an important site of study, however.15 As J. P. Telotte posits, the film’s influence extends from Pixar’s tendency to “suggest ways to get back, to map our alternatives to a postmodern retreat from the real and from the world.”16 As topics addressed in the film (such as ways of living well with technology) remain unreconciled points of cultural interest, WALL•E’s status as important public pedagogy remains strong nearly ten years after its release.17

This essay analyzes WALL•E to understand how the interplay of technology and social values is reconciled in popular form.18 My central argument is that WALL•E uses virtues to express ways of living well with technology, but with the premise that such corrective practice follows automatically. Said differently, the film frames virtuous behavior as a reflexive quality of agents rather than something developed through skill and sustained engagement. This analysis provides two points of relevance for rhetorical criticism. First, it illustrates limitations of rhetoric framed through what Kenneth Burke called the agent-act ratio wherein causation of events is explained primarily by the identity of agents.19 Relatedly, it also uncovers a broader trend in popular discourse that shifts the frame for explaining the cause of virtues from a lens of craft (techne) to a lens of crude automation (technology). In the remainder of this essay, I explore how WALL•E presents the possibilities of virtue in people and machines, and explain the implications of such messaging within the function of films as sites for conveying rhetorical agency. Though my later evaluation of WALL•E is critical, such conclusions should not be mistaken for definitive answers on living well with technology. Rather, this essay concludes by calling for increased scrutiny to messages that undermine the importance of rhetorical judgment by imagining agency as automatic.

Programming, Humanized

Director and co-writer Andrew Stanton describes WALL•E as a story about overcoming systems of rigidity, summarized in the proposition that “irrational love defeats life’s programming.”20 This contest unfolds in three phases.21 In the first act, the robot title character (“Waste Allocation Load Lifter—Earth Class”) dutifully compacts an endless supply of trash on an abandoned Earth. He is alone in a vast wasteland, save for a pet cockroach. Nevertheless, WALL•E is curious, and pines for a vision of love documented in his VHS copy of the musical Hello Dolly! He seeks companionship—to dance and hold hands—but is thwarted by isolation. When another robot named EVE arrives on Earth, he is smitten. This potential for connection is undermined, however, when WALL•E shows EVE his prized collection of knickknacks from the refuse, including a tender plant in an old boot. When he shows her the plant, EVE stores it away, unexpectedly powers down, and is soon retrieved from Earth by a carrier ship.

WALL•E follows EVE into space, signaling the start of the film’s second act. Here we encounter future human culture in the year 2805. We also learn that 700 years earlier, the powerful conglomerate “Buy N Large” (BNL)—whose remnants and automated billboards still cover the unpopulated Earth—built a massive vessel called the Axiom to house humanity in space as robots cleaned up the planet. Recovery never happened, and people now live, as David Denby states, among the stars on “comfortably bedded little hovercrafts in which screens, constantly switched on, stand in front of their faces.”22 On the Axiom, social health has deteriorated, and connection is thwarted by distraction.23 All motion follows what Stanton calls “self-fulfilling programming,” or “routines” fueled by vapid, consumerist appetites.24 WALL•E disrupts this system. His uniqueness, coupled with changing behavior from the ship’s Captain (McCrea) and passengers (Mary and John), instigate humanity’s return to Earth. The second act also reveals that EVE (Extraterrestrial Vegetation Evaluator) is a bot programmed to scout for plant life on Earth—a sign the planet is no longer

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Lessons on Living Well: Film and Agency

Writers dating back to Aristotle have argued that formal education and habit nurture the development of practical reasoning needed to exercise agency. From such preparation, people can call upon what Karlyn Kohrs Campbell describes as “an ability to respond well and appropriately to the contingencies of circumstance.” The interplay between virtues, agency, and communication carries over to epideictic rhetoric, wherein speakers draw attention to values by offering instructive cases for public contemplation. Rhetorical critics have argued that film is an equally important form of public pedagogy that, like epideictic speech, showcases values to guide conduct. In Thomas Benson’s description, film “implies its audience and the interpretive actions of its audience.” Katheryn Olson extends this point, noting how films often feature “epideictic dimensions,” or value commitments that, though not the “dominant or preferred reading of the text,” are nevertheless “constituted by textual layers that teach and maintain a community’s ‘common’ beliefs and values to guide members’ behavior,” often with deference to established norms of power. This echoes Barry Brummett’s argument that for audiences, films function as a process of ethical “socialization” that includes “persuading people to accept the values, norms, and practice of a group, but also of educating them about the wisdom and prudence of doing so.” When understood as public pedagogy, familiar descriptions of having “watched” or “seen” a film seem insufficient to understand film’s capacity for public influence. Instead, critics study the way such texts create models for attitudes and behaviors, inviting audiences to potentially assume or adopt the narrative’s view of agency for their own experiences.

As public pedagogy, films are representations of and invitations for audiences to understand agency in certain ways. This observation assumes that agency is not merely an individual’s ability to toxic. On the Axiom, however, the plant is a threat to the autopilot (Auto). It conspires to keep the ship in space, following a secret directive issued by the BNL “Global CEO” (read: President) early in the ship’s log after clean-up efforts were abandoned. In the climactic struggle, EVE verifies the plant in the ship’s “holo-detector” after WALL•E wedges it open in an act of self-sacrifice. The Captain turns off the Autopilot. The ship returns to Earth. In a brief final act, connection finally follows: EVE repairs WALL•E and they share companionship, while humans—freed from their infantilized state—assume a nurturing relationship with one another. As the credits role, people are standing for the first time in centuries with the agency to pursue fulfilling lives.

WALL•E teaches audiences to take seriously the threat of automation. Ann Howey claims the film reinforces the notion that the “danger of programming is loss of individuality.” Additionally, several scholars emphasize character transformations as central to the film, focusing on humans changing: from “mindless consumers to eco-pioneers”; from “living for recreation” to “relearn[ing] the value of work”; and from indulging “(childlike) consumerist whims” to embracing “stewardship” and responsibility. Yet a different conclusion of the film emerges when we scrutinize how these transitions occur. As Richard Corliss notes, the “plot pirouettes on the ability of the humans to show as much grit and heart” as WALL•E. In other words, people regain individuality from automation by thinking and acting differently. I argue that WALL•E’s narrative of cultural recovery hinges on characters’ capacity for virtues, or what Alasdair MacIntyre calls “dispositions not only to act in particular ways, but also to feel in particular ways.” For the human characters that audiences are most likely to identify with, these virtues reflect forms of practical reasoning theretofore hindered by seven centuries of isolation and distraction. As a site for addressing questions of technology and social life—that is, demonstrating how people grappling with similar struggles can “show heart”—WALL•E should be analyzed to understand how this beneficial behavior is achieved. It is not enough to consider dystopian life on the Axiom and ponder, with Richard Blake, “How did this come to pass?” For critics interested in how films function as public pedagogy, the more pressing question becomes: How does WALL•E teach audiences to respond to similar challenges? We witness humanity adrift on screen. According to the film, how do they get back?
engage the world, but rather what Carolyn Miller calls a “kinetic energy” that emphasizes the interaction of participants. For Miller, agency extends to “a property of the rhetorical event or performance itself,” positioned “exactly between the agent’s capacity and the effect on an audience.” This rhetoric rests on resonance insofar as films are invitations to understand and reconcile unresolved questions. As Brummett clarifies, a film can engage audiences by “providing explicit or formal resolution of situations or experience similar to those which people actually confront, thus providing people with motives to address their dilemmas in life.” Analyzing the agency of film means assessing not the accuracy of action, but how the causation of events—the way characters solve problems, receive reward, or navigate situations—nurture or neglects the kinetic transferability of resolving resonant social questions. WALL•E seems uniquely suited to fulfill this function of public pedagogy given its combination of audience appeal and social topicality by featuring, in the words of David Price, “characters that are appealing to children” and yet confronting “adult problems.”

WALL•E also hinges on a more specific confrontation between automation and social life familiar to debates on agency and technology. In Miller’s view, for example, a hypothetical automated grading system demonstrates how machines lack interactive agency. Her claim adopts Kenneth Burke’s distinction between people and machines, and the respective capacities for symbolic action and motion. Burke argued that technology was a subject that “invites us to put the major stress upon knowledge,” which, he concludes, “falls directly under the head of the agent.” Such rhetoric follows the philosophy of idealism, with attention to how “man’s character and the character of his behavior [sic]” explain corresponding actions. Though Burke’s distinction between symbolic action and automated motion is well known, WALL•E illustrates the complication that arises when social issues are addressed with focus on the agent alone. Hence, the relevancy of WALL•E to this scholarly debate is not whether technology can help or hinder agency, but rather how the public presentation of human agency as automation does or does not offer methods for grappling with such ethical questions. To aid in this approach, I argue we should interrogate Burke’s explanations of agents and acts more closely against the potentials for interactive agency in film.

For Burke, agents can include a purview of “general or specific” kinds of people, and “motivational properties or agents, such as ‘drives,’ ‘instincts,’ ‘states of mind.’” Knowledge may reside in the agent, but Burke’s theory is less clear about how one’s accumulated responses fit into the dramatistic framework. For example, acts explained by the agent, Burke writes, “might be said to ‘pre-exist virtually’ within an agent,” such as when the drive toward “democracy” is “felt to reside in us, intrinsically, because we are ‘a democratic people.’” WALL•E illustrates the drawback of relying on an agent-act reconciliation of questions regarding technology and social values as it presumes the good behavior that corrects course follows from characters’ mere identity as people, not from their education, habits, or practices. Indeed, Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische have persuasively argued that agency begins as a “temporally embedded process of social engagement,” meaning one’s abilities are both interactive, and develop “within the flow of time.” Hence, I contend that the agent-act ratio doesn’t adequately account for the temporal plane inclusive to modern accounts of agency, and thereby undercuts the reconciliation of a social problem with the identity and capabilities of audiences. As an alternative, the agent-agency-act frame offers a corrective to the shortcomings of the agent-act ratio by opening up pedagogical relations between efforts and results, making the implied causation expressed in popular form an accessible resource that might be adopted by audiences. As I argue below, WALL•E lacks this resourcefulness. Though its depiction of humans as “giant floating babies” fits as a recognizable vision of social vice, its representation of agency undermines its pedagogical value when weighed against the behavioral and temporal planes of characters in the film. The result is a contradictory but influential public pedagogy for social anxieties that I refer to as automatic agency.

Automatic agency is a rhetorical position premised on the deterministic assumption that one’s capacities for influence follow from necessity rather than craft. It dispenses with conventional sources of virtue, such as time, education, or sustained interaction with others, and instead presumes
such abilities occur efficiently—akin to a reflex—with little (or no) sustained engagement. Rather than focusing on the contingency of ethical judgment, automatic agency assumes this ability is generalizable and replicated across people. Automatic agency reverses the conventional lineage of virtues from technē to crudely mechanized technology (or, in Stanton’s words, directive “programming”). Carl Mitcham defines technē as a habit learned through imitation, elaborating it “is not strictly activity, but the capacity for action, founded in a special kind of knowledge.” Unlike nature, production from technē is derived, in Wolfgang Schadewalt’s words, from “the thinking soul of him [sic] who initiates the technical process; i.e., the production.” Technology as “programming” in WALL•E, by contrast, frames production as a “systematic treatment,” or that which is removed from contingency in what Mitcham calls “production process rather than production of some one thing.” In a stripped-down comparison, writing a protest anthem takes technē; the song is recorded and played back with programmable technology.

WALL•E normalizes the assumption that moral decision-making brings humans back from cultural decline, and “operates” as mechanized technology. In this way, the film suggests questions of technology and living well can be answered by rhetorically framing moral judgments to resemble—not critically respond to—automation. The film doesn’t focus on our use of technology; it invites us to be like technology. Such rhetoric illustrates why agency (or its absence) makes a preferable metric by which popular rhetoric—such as those engaging questions of technology and social values—should be evaluated. For WALL•E, the agency to live well is only a transferrable quality if we assume one’s capacity for moral reasoning follows like a computer’s accelerated processing after a reboot.

**Automatic Agency In WALL•E**

WALL•E explains human devolution by exchanging (and exaggerating) traits normally assigned to people and machines. Robots can fall in love and humans can be mechanical, or as Scott clarifies, objects in WALL•E have “become human” while “humans have become objects.” Hence, the film complicates the relation between human virtues and machine automation on the premise that human habits are comparable to mechanical hard-wiring. This follows Stanton’s premise that a robot’s “directive” and a human’s “routine” are close kin: “[T]he most robotic beings I’ve met,” the director suggests, “are us.” As such, the consummate act of human heroism in this futuristic adventure is a Captain breaking routine to stand up and turn off an autopilot with the press of a button. Yet, in analyzing characters’ behavior and capabilities against the temporal flow of the film, I argue that WALL•E extends this exchange between humans and machines to include the development of moral reasoning in wake of its former absence. In so doing, the film substitutes technē for mechanized technology as the dominant framework to understand the agency of virtues. Though the plot follows robots that often feel more keenly than humans, the human-machine comparison nevertheless illustrates WALL•E’s epideictic dimension that living well with technology derives from automatic agency.

**Virtue Reboot: Restarting the Good**

The template for automatic agency as it relates to humans is also vividly portrayed in WALL•E’s experience during the final act of the film. This sequence makes an effective place to begin analysis. To recount, WALL•E and EVE impede Auto’s attempts to destroy the plant specimen and keep the Axiom in space. Once the plant is retrieved, however, Auto aggressively responds by electrocuting WALL•E and frying his circuit board. WALL•E is left weak and subdued, but determined. He is damaged even more, however, in a sacrificial effort to delay Auto from sealing the holo-detector before the plant is verified (the last thing needed to return the Axiom to Earth). The robots succeed, but WALL•E is left crushed and unresponsive—mechanically dead. Back on Earth, EVE performs a near-total replacement using spare parts collected in WALL•E’s home, key among these being a fresh
circuit board. It seems to work. Yet, upon restarting, WALL•E is not himself: he compacts his treasured knickknacks, ignores his pet cockroach under his tire treads, and fails to recognize EVE. She mournfully holds WALL•E’s hand and hums his favorite song from Hello Dolly! As she comes close, the two share a quiet spark between headsets. Suddenly, WALL•E is himself again: he holds EVE’s hand in reciprocation, remembers who he is, the things around him, and why they matter. Despite beginning from scratch and undergoing a temporary return to his original, unblinking directive, his seemingly essential personality was retrieved in an experiential reboot, needing only to be spurred by EVE’s electric touch. As Stanton explains, the reboot idea is a powerful contrast to the vulnerability of total loss, and a “missing spark” or “defibrillator kind of jolt to kick the last circuit on WALL•E.”

WALL•E’s case is illustrative at the outset because it complicates the conventional dichotomy between motion and action, and informs how we can understand the film’s philosophy of human agency. When we first encounter WALL•E in isolation he is compacting trash (his directive for seven centuries), but gradually breaking rank. He collects artifacts that intrigue him, and—most importantly—follows his love for EVE by abandoning his post altogether. In the director’s commentary of the film, Stanton explains WALL•E’s unique duality: an ambivalence toward some forms of consumerist culture (he ignores light-up advertisements and discarded money) coupled with curiosity from having “evolved some sort of sensitivity and emotion” in his time alone on Earth. In explaining this change, Stanton invokes an organic metaphor, stating, “[WALL•E’s] desire to know life and to fall in love…took 700 years, but it still comes up through the cement.” Audiences don’t witness the “evolution” from rote programming to curiosity, care, and love. However, upon restarting from EVE’s repair, WALL•E’s concern is for directive without character. The real “reboot” happens when the two share contact and WALL•E regains the behavior he had before the encounter with Auto. Though WALL•E “evolves” the capacity to act and chooses by some unexplained mystique in the time preceding the film, his recovery at its end is a brief, initial return to his least advanced (directive-based), then most advanced self. EVE serves as the linchpin to recovering his personality. We could hypothetically imagine that if roles were reversed, EVE’s total reboot would similarly bring her “back” to herself as she became with WALL•E, not her original, directive-based-self. Herein lies the promise of automatic agency the film applies to human characters. Whether robot or human, directive or habit, WALL•E presumes that recovery from the condition of “programming”—however one may arrive—is a return to a concentrated and unchanging essence, such as WALL•E at his most loyal and loving, and humans as their most curious and caring. We get better, in other words, by resetting to the best versions of ourselves. In this public pedagogy, agency frees one from automation, but is born of two distinctly mechanical traits: responsiveness and replication.

WALL•E makes clear that human habits have worsened in 700 years. Automated BNL advertisements on an abandoned Earth offer a measure for time before and between life on the Axiom. “Too much garbage in your face?” a commercial asks. “There’s plenty of space in space! BNL star liners leaving each day. We’ll clean up the mess while you’re away.” Comfort is substituted for concern, with special mention that with new “hover chairs,” “even Grandma can join the fun! There’s no need to walk!” On the Axiom, we witness this regression through trained passivity. Whereas previous ads featured people leisurely conversing and playing golf or tennis, later passengers are isolated and stationary; they speak through machines and robots play for them. Activity derives from corporate cues to eat (“Mmmm! Time for lunch in a cup”) and the chance to arbitrarily change the color of their uniform jumpsuits from red to blue, which everyone follows. Regression is further emphasized in appearance. Humans are portrayed by live actors in scenes from Earth and early in the ship’s voyage, then as animated figures for future Axiom passengers. An early scene in the Captain’s quarters’ profiles former heads of ship with “[e]ach generation” represented “more devolved than the other.” In behavior and appearance, humans have regressed to cartoon versions of their former selves.

The first way that characters break from this “programming” is by becoming more attentive. Initially people are seen “coooned in virtual words,” and speaking to one another yet “totally
unaware of the other’s presence.” This “inattention blindness” is a social harm on the *Axiom* not featured in flashbacks to life on Earth, but characters correct course quickly. As WALL-E follows a still-dormant EVE across the *Axiom*, he encounters Mary, an adult passenger who unknowingly obstructs his path. She is engrossed in her screen and talking on a video phone as advertisements mercilessly pop into her line of vision. In getting Mary’s attention, WALL-E breaks off her head-set, ceasing video display. As the screenplay describes, Mary’s “eyes slowly dilate,” and she takes in her surroundings “as if she’s seeing the world for the first time,” unhindered. Her appearance signals this change, too. When the headset is removed, her body-suit changes from blue back to red, visually distinguishing her from other *Axiom* passengers. Mary now engages her environment differently. She exits the train car after WALL-E moves on, ignores pathway lighting that directs hover chairs, and notices the obvious: “I didn’t know we had a pool!”

This stimulus-response pattern repeats with John, another passenger who had a fleeting encounter with WALL-E earlier in the day. His interaction with Mary is similarly revelatory. It’s evening by the *Axiom’s* clock, and Mary is alone by the ship’s windows. “So many stars,” she observes to herself. While admiring the cosmic view, she bumps into John and disables his holo-screen. Like Mary before, John’s suit turns from blue back to red. He is never the same. The two spot WALL-E and EVE flying outside the window. WALL-E waves to John. He excitedly reciprocates, and “comes to life as if wakened from a long sleep.” John and Mary accidentally touch hands, “make eye contact for the first time,” and sit for a dramatic pause. New choices follow from this encounter: they stay up after automated bed-time, break the rules about using the pool (which John hadn’t noticed either), and seem genuinely engaged with one another.

In a third and more elaborate example, the ship’s Captain (McCrea) undergoes a similar transformation in both attention and intelligence. By this point the film has established that intellect has taken a bruising in this imagined future. Wind turbines and nuclear power plants sit amid heaps of trash, indicating last-minute and failed efforts to remedy a polluted planet. Confidence in judgment slides further by the naked conflation of politics and corporatism vividly witnessed in old BNL advertisements and personified by the presence of a shyster CEO as public leader. People have not only reneged on civic responsibilities, but have turned such choices over to moneyed interests: the BNL logo dots currency and the international flag alike. Again, the symmetry between the remnants of Earth and life on the *Axiom* is telling in that little has improved over seven centuries on the ship. Of the film’s few gestures to education—or youth,—we learn that child rearing occurs in an “All Day’ Care Center,” with an expectedly heavy dose of corporate messaging; “A! ‘A’ is for ‘Axiom’, your home sweet home. ‘B’! ‘B’ is for ‘Buy N Large’, your very best friend,” a “Nanny Bot” calls out monotonously to a group of dazed toddlers staring at a screen. In multiple stages of the life cycle education is neglected or subverted.

At first, McCrea follows this trend. He is intellectually feeble. While announcing the 700th anniversary of the ship’s “five-year cruise” during morning announcements, his voice peters out when considering how “our forefathers would be proud to know that 700 years later we’d be...doing the exact same thing...they were doing...”, without a clear sense of irony. He works hard to pronounce “septuacentennial” with the help of a screen application, and turns repeatedly to the autopilot to know how things work (“Hey, Auto, what’s that flashing button?”). As with Mary and John, McCrea lacks a handle on past facts. He is unaware his ship has a jogging track, or that his body might be overweight. When informed that EVE returned from Earth with a plant specimen, he is told (via a programmed video) to consult the ship’s manual for instructions. As the relevant text appears from a chute, he holds it and, speaking to what he assumes is a program, shakes and beckons the object: “Manuel, relay instructions. Manuel?” While watching the book’s pages flip—presumably for the first time—he is “fascinated and intimidated.” Though he is eager to do morning announcements—“the one thing I get to do on this ship”—his resolve is weak. When informed EVE does not, in fact, possess a plant—a word he forgets soon after learning (“Where’s the thingy?”), he assumes EVE is defective and expresses relief: “Well, false alarm!” Unaware of Auto’s ruse in hiding the plant, he is glad to return to routine: “So, uh, I guess things go back to normal, huh?” His
initial ignorance resonates with our tensions on information access: he doesn’t remember anything because, as Norman Taylor notes, the value of memory or “broad general knowledge” dissipates “when we can Google whatever we need to know.”\textsuperscript{81} Reliance on convenient automation has weakened McCrea’s intellect and curiosity.

A quick encounter with WALL•E changes this. Like Mary and John, McCrea transforms in several important ways after shaking WALL•E’s retractable hand, and analyzing the dirt specimen collected from the encounter. He disobeys automated prompts by staying up late to learn about Earth from the ship’s computer. Unlike Mary and John, his value toward attention and curiosity occurs in relative isolation with the computer’s condensed, encyclopedic answers. He is up all night, “fascinated,” “ta[k]ing it all in,” and “[g]lued to his screen.”\textsuperscript{82} Though he gazes at his screen like every other passenger—a position previously equated to a fugue-like state—McCrea transcends his prior condition to possess a new moral judgment without explanation beyond experiential epiphany. Though his grasp on specifics is uneven (he believes one can grow pizza), his transformation is profound, and witnessed in his rebuff to Auto’s counsel that staying in space ensures survival: “I don’t want to survive, I want to live!”

These three examples reinforce the idea that one’s capacity to break programming and exercise moral judgment emerges quickly and from external stimulus.\textsuperscript{83} As the film makes clear, certain acts make possible the abilities of corresponding agents, and vice versa. As Burke noted, the act-agent ratio often interacts with the agent-act ratio: “The agent is an author of his acts, which are descended from him,” in the latter sense, while in the former sense, “his acts can make him or remake him in accordance with their nature. They would be his product and/or he would be theirs [sic].”\textsuperscript{84} Acts can be said to derive from one’s being or influencing an agent, such as the sanctified transformation that occurs, Burke postulated, when one wears “priestly vestments,” or the sort. By exchanging human and machine traits, WALL•E adopts an unconventional version of agency that frames the capacity for moral reasoning as a reboot of best-imagined virtues, but fails to account for the temporality that would explain the cultivation of character. A machine reboot implies a (re)connection to something prior—in WALL•E’s case, his personality before the circuit board damage and replacement after a brief moment guided by his original directive. When this model is applied to people, however, the return of moral reasoning is likened to waking from a trance—as if the judgment to pay attention and think critically were merely a dormant and necessary part of an agent’s essence. By emphasizing the experiential encounter (act) to partially explain the roused reasoning of characters (agents), WALL•E dispenses with the conventional notion that virtues arise from, in Martha Nussbaum’s words, “the grasping of particulars” in “experienced judgment.”\textsuperscript{86} In likening people to machines, WALL•E implies a view of agency wherein efficiency trumps learning as a process, and dovetails with Neil Postman’s warning that humans are—even in value judgments—imagining themselves as only “information processors,” or channels without discerning purpose.\textsuperscript{87}

By framing virtues as automatic, WALL•E also alters the idea that their practice requires interaction with others. When Mary, John, and McCrea make decisions differently, they do so at the expense of contemplating contingency. With experiential epiphanies, characters transform from their holding pattern in corporate obedience to performing what Emirbayer and Mische call “agency as practical evaluation,” defined through “the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgments” that “respond to emerging demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of presently evolving situations.”\textsuperscript{88} Key among these transitions for Mary, John, and McCrea is the decision not to revert back to prior habit as each begins to evaluate choices differently. When presumed as automatic and derived from an experiential “jolt,” automatic agency subtracts the ways of evaluating a decision from its results. For example, the Captain’s agency seems fully evident when he confronts Auto with a range of strategies in the climax of the film. In an impromptu moment, he hotwires his console equipment to send a message to WALL•E and EVE, and uses old video displays to fool Auto into allowing him back into the control room. In this and other cases, exercising agency follows from a minimal communicative exchange, with other people serving minimally—if at all—as external stimulus to a behavioral reboot.\textsuperscript{89}
Replicated Virtues: The Humane Response

The framework of automatic agency is reinforced through the second facet of uniform effect. To illustrate this feature, I return to scenes of the final struggle to verify the plant and spur the Axiom’s return to Earth. Once McCrea activates the ship’s holo-detector, all passengers (still seated in their hover-chairs) are gathered into a common area called the “Lido Deck” as a safety measure. Auto struggles with McCrea and—to gain advantage with an opponent who won’t stand—turns the ship to one side. Passengers fall out of their hover-chairs and collect into a giant mass of flesh against the ship’s windows. This instigates a remarkable transition: as passengers are deposited from chairs, each uniform jump suit “defaults” from blue to red, echoing the experiential epiphanies witnessed earlier in Mary and John. Appearance alter; behaviors follow.

Changes are evident in newfound discernment toward others. First, all passengers demonstrate a capacity for compassion theretofore unseen. When WALL•E valiantly uses himself to block the holo-detector from closing against Auto’s efforts, the encounter leaves him crumpled on the floor. The passengers, now “awake” and out of their chairs, stand from seeing the Captain’s example, and take mutual care seriously. They are concerned. As the screenplay states, witnessing WALL•E’s motionless exterior is revolutionary as passengers “witness grief for the first time” with “new feelings of their own: sadness, sympathy.” Though some response might be expected, the remarkable trait here is how the film has stressed an obvious lack of attention for others up to this point. For example, passengers share conversations while unaware of each other’s nearby presence, and a typical encounter with a beautician bot—which applies make-up, fixes hair, and trims nails—epitomizes the thin value of communication on the Axiom, as it recites the same response to everyone: “I see. I know, honey. I know. I’m good. I am good. You look gorgeous.” Without time to develop care in personal encounters or the will follow its cultivation, characters demonstrate compassion without precedent or practice.

This newfound compassion lends itself to altruism. Like McCrea’s ability to exercise intellectual resources, the passengers respond to WALL•E and EVE’s predicament well, and against previous habits. They stand and react to the plight of the robots attempting to verify the plant in the holo-detector. After expressing a sense of grief, they also work together to retrieve the plant and pass it to EVE, ushering the specimen along as a baton passed in a relay race. Up to this time, however, passengers have been unaware of Auto’s conspiracy to keep the Axiom in space. To the contrary, they were earlier warned through the ship’s video system (an unavoidable sight for everyone with a holo-screen) that WALL•E and EVE were “rogue robots” after they inadvertently started an uprising of fellow machine misfits that were said to be dangerous and avoided at all costs. The appropriate response, worry, was evident in passenger reactions. Witnessing the new struggle to verify the plant and undergoing a transition by falling from one’s chair, however, yields an adjusted insight without time to learn. Passengers no longer fear EVE, WALL•E, or other robots, but instead acquire judgment to both trust and help them.

Passengers’ clothes are reset from a flippant decision earlier in the day, and so to their capacity for moral reasoning occurs as if a reflexive and replicated response. In both instances—the capacity for compassion and altruistic judgment—responses are both predicated on an experiential epiphany and uniform in effect. These reactions are not developed, uneven, or with even minor exception, but rather produced and reproduced. Such necessary results betray suggestion that emotional judgments involve contingent reasoning, or what Nussbaum calls decisions “shaped by developing thought and highly discriminating in their relations.” When contrasted with the centuries of (mal)practice that defines life on the Axiom, WALL•E frames the presence of virtuous behavior as uniform in knowledge and effect. In this way, WALL•E’s narrative against automation surprisingly corresponds to Jacques Ellul’s argument on the overwhelming and deterministic force he termed la technique. For Ellul, human spontaneity and choice are formidable foes, but ultimately succumb to automation’s determinism: “Technique requires predictability and, not less, exactness of prediction,” even “over the human being.” This follows, Ellul elaborates, when technique is adjusted to people, or
alternately “by the adaption of man to the technical framework in order to wipe out the blots his [sic] personal determination introduces into the perfect design of the organization.”94 In WALL•E characters make moral judgments not because they possess ability from practice, but because these judgments pre-exist as a concentrated, hidden essence, “activated” from an external stimulus. The implied hope is that our best selves are sustained within tides of miseducation and vice.

This promise of uniformity and adjustment of humans to technology is evident, finally, in the credits that close the film. This sequence—directed by Jim Capobianco—functions to “finish the story” once humans come back to Earth.95 While some interpreted this narrative coda as a sign of humanity’s “capacity for rejuvenation”96 and proof that “culture can be revived,”97 the final minutes of WALL•E further reinforce the proposition that good human culture is not just revived but also rebooted. The sequence showcases multiple scenes of former passengers establishing a post-Axiom society. Familiar periods of art history visually portray the passage of time since returning to Earth, ranging from “Stone Age to the Impressionists to … 8-bit pixel sprites,” each tapered to coincide with animated scenes that show the “recivilization process of Earth 2.0,” including the “invention” of fire, farming, architecture, trade, and blossoming city life.98 The “correlation” between Earth 2.0 and its predecessor is purposefully—if unevenly—matched.99 While this sequence suggests that former Axiom passengers use robots in a primarily assistive—not dependent—role, this telling of cultural development further reinforces WALL•E’s message of agency in that actions reinforce a pattern of general uniformity. Lost in this telling is any sense that after 800 years of hedonistic leisure, civilization might develop differently from what came before (or beyond the preferences of largely Western aesthetics). Humans return to Earth but follow the parallel path that preceded them, reinforcing the premise of automatic agency to human culture in the film, as past determining future. “Culture” doesn’t wither or regress in time, by this logic, but rather returns in a familiar form.

Society reboots on Earth 2.0.

Though creative agents behind WALL•E seem critical of automation, the rhetoric of the film consistently equates characters’ abilities in moral reasoning with technological programming. In addition to WALL•E’s example near the close of the film, the “reboot” of virtues in people is also mirrored in the ship’s return journey to Earth. The Axiom (a name blandly denoting self-evident truth) is initially nestled in a purple nebula of distant space, as if in a dream state. When the plant is verified in the holo-detector (a singular stimulus), the transition back to Earth follows with efficiency—“Ten seconds to hyper-jump,” the ship’s computer calls out. In a moment, all aboard move at light speed and are soon, in McCrea’s words, “home—for the first time!” Everything resets to “normal.”

Closing Thoughts

The Internet age invites a range of unreconciled questions on the values and social practices related to technological change. For audiences worried about finding balance in this environment, WALL•E implies that humans can improve 700 years of neglectful habits largely because of who they are, not what they do. If virtues are automatic and uniform, the need to refashion—or even question—current behavior diminishes in the trust that our better selves will necessarily respond when properly stimulated. Inviting others to imagine virtues this way obviates the need to consider living well as a craft derived from rhetorical practice: “[N]o one deliberates about things invariable,” Aristotle noted.100 As I briefly demonstrate below, the rhetoric of automatic agency is relevant to issues beyond the case of WALL•E.

Automatic agency is evident when human abilities are framed as following from necessity rather than craft. Recent debates on whether “digital natives” possess enhanced abilities to effectively navigate online terrain compared to “digital immigrants” draws attention to arguments that overly rely on an agent-act ratio akin to those implied in WALL•E.101 Similar discursive appeals are also evident in early discussions on technology use as addiction. Consider reSTART, a rehabilitation center for Internet addiction in northern Washington state that offers a range of services designed to “help detox residents and teach them the basic life skills they need to properly balance their tech
use.” However, the rhetoric of reSTART begins by equating people and machines. Its model, the brochure reads, includes correlative descriptions of person-to-person services in technological metaphors, including “CPU,” “System Board,” “Memory,” “Hard Drive,” “Power Supply,” “Apps,” and “Tech Support.” Similar to a computer system, it elaborates, “whose operation is dependent upon interrelated parts working in unison, true healing occurs as individuals, families and communities are strengthened together.” Without treading into the debate over Internet addition itself, in both name and explanation, reSTART participates in the idea that living well includes a recovery of a virtuous action that can follow similar to a computer reboot. To refute this position, critics should challenge the premise of human agency as innate or “hard-wired,” and instead emphasize a variation of the agent-agency-act ratio as a preferable pedagogy.

In addition to privileging the language of automation to human actions, automatic agency might also be evident when rhetors diminish the perceived variability of technology itself. If we consider technology beyond its role as a channel of narrow, engineered sameness, and imagine its potential instead as an outgrowth of human initiatives and goals—what José Ortega y Gasset called “the adaptation of the medium to the individual”—the contingency of people extends to the contingency of devices. WALL•E’s assumption that matching devices leads to matching consumption habits, which when reversed leads to matching character traits, flattens this flexibility in people and technology alike. Again, modern debates on technology and education illustrate how the premise of replication in automated agency stubbornly remains. In late 2016, U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson (R-WI) proposed that online classes could simplify modern learning. “Why do you have to keep paying different lecturers to teach the same course? You get one solid lecturer and put it up online and have everybody available to that knowledge for a whole lot cheaper?” Johnson asked. Online learning need not be dismissed wholesale, but Johnson’s premise assumes that technology and people abide by easy replication, which would allow, in his view, other institutions to “keep duplicating that [model] over all these different subject areas.” To refute this position, critics should continue to challenge arguments that assume insight is gleaned from truncated exposure and replicated content, and continue to advocate interactive engagement as a preferred condition to the craft of learning.

“We are left, as humans always have been, to imagine the future largely in the form of a story,” James Arnt Aune observed. As I’ve argued in this essay, when virtues are framed as a social remedy to public questions (as they are in WALL•E and elsewhere), critical emphasis should be placed on both agents and the agency that make practical reasoning possible. Automatic agency, by contrast, invites the notion that personal and cultural recovery can occur without this artistry, like arrival without travel and acumen without trial. Combatting this contradictory pedagogy begins with the premise that public issues are not answered with finality, and neither is the character of this epoch pre-determined. Hence, stories that privilege the benefits of practical reasoning should be held to the standard that such agency not be divorced from the investment, practice, and benefits included in the craft of rhetorical judgment. Such an evaluation of our public pedagogy can remind us that if somehow set back, our better selves won’t return automatically.

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Notes

1. WALL•E, directed by Andrew Stanton (2008; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Home Entertainment, 2008), DVD. All quoted dialogue refers to this source.


5. Gopnik, “The Information.”


12. The same year WALL·E was released mobile technologies (smartphones) were noted as having “become a—if not—the defining medium of this time period.” Serena Hashimoto and Scott Campbell, “The Occupation of Ethernal Locations: Indications of Mobile Data,” Critical Studies in Media Communication 25, no. 5 (December, 2008): 538.


21. My summary on the distinctative phases of WALL*E’s plot somewhat mirrors that of Murray and Heumann, See “WALL-E: From Environmental Nostalgia to Sentimental Nostalgia”.


24. WALL-E, Director’s Commentary.


40. Ibid.


42. Chatman argues that narratives rely on implied causation. They do not merely showcase time, but rather “time as seen as the compass in which successive events occur.” Seymour Chatman, “Towards a Theory of Narrative,” *New Literary History* 6, no. 2 (Winter 1975): 313.


55. The elevation of agency as a point of analysis derives from contemporary theorists’ efforts to expand the concept beyond what Burke called the “means or instruments” used by an agent. Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, xv, xx–xxi.


59. Schadewalt, “The Greek Concepts,” endnote 30, 31. Schadewalt and Mitcham argue Aristotle was the first to join *techne* and *logos* in *On Rhetoric*. To clarify, Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric—“an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion”—assumes an application of reasoning within specific audiences and situations, not grammar for the mere sake of producing. See Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, 37.

60. Mitcham, *Thinking Through Technology*, 133; For Ellul, the computer represents a “joining” moment in definitions of “technique” as activities or “technology” as a system. See Jacques Ellul, *The Technological System* (New York: Continuum, 1980), 26.

61. This distinction is perhaps overly broad, and adopts what I consider the view of technology used to convey human agency in the film. For an overview on technology’s more inclusive definitions, see Don Ihde, *Philosophy and Technology: An Introduction* (New York: Paragon House), 3–46; Mitcham, *Thinking Through Technology*. 

63. Gaffey and Jones Barbour argue that agency is also preferred metric to evaluate public memorials. See Adam J. Gaffey and Jennifer L. Jones Barbour, “A Spirit That Can Never Be Told: Commemorative Agency and the Texas A&M University Bonfire Memorial” Rhetoric & Public Affairs (forthcoming).


66. WALL•E, Director’s Commentary.


68. WALL•E, Director’s Commentary. For Anderson, WALL•E’s personality beyond his directive is nevertheless stuck in “perpetual adolescence” when weighed against the gravity of the film’s situations. Anderson, “Post-Apocalyptic Nostalgia,” 273.

69. WALL•E, Director’s Commentary.


73. Stanton and Reardon, WALL•E Screenplay, 27.

74. 2008 (the year WALL-E was released) was notable for distraction-related injuries. “[I]nattention blindness” refers to how “a person can be looking at an object but fail to register it or process what it is,” Richtel reports that “more than 1,000 pedestrians visited emergency rooms” for no other reason than they “fell or ran into something while using a cell phone to talk or text.” This rate in 2008 doubled from the previous year, and was four times as many as was recorded in 2006. Matt Richtel, “Forget Gum. Walking and Using Phone is Risky,” New York Times, January 16, 2010, A1.

75. Stanton and Reardon, WALL•E, Screenplay, 31.

76. Stanton and Reardon, WALL•E Screenplay, 56.

77. Stanton and Reardon, WALL•E Screenplay, 57.

78. Moore, “Green Screen or Smokescreen,” 547.

79. Stanton posits humanity graduated out of the “toddler phase” by film’s end. WALL•E, Director’s Commentary.

80. Stanton and Reardon, WALL•E Screenplay, 39.


82. Stanton and Reardon, WALL•E Screenplay, 43.

83. The epiphanies in the film elide the notion that characters change thanks to reason, or akin to Kant’s categorical imperative. On the question of permitting a lie, Kant writes, “as soon as such a maxim was made a universal law, it would necessarily destroy itself.” In the film, Mary complains on her video phone, “Every holo-date I’ve been on has been a virtual disaster!” Were Mary testing her behavior this way, her combined rationality and realization should be enough to know the morally appropriate response to her conditions. It is not until her headset is disconnected that she comes to “know” her moral truth and decide differently, however. See Immanuel Kant, “The Good Will and the Categorical Imperative,” in The European Philosophers from Descartes to Nietzsche, ed. Monroe C. Beardsley (New York: The Modern Library, 1960), 379–380, 472.

84. Burke, A Grammar of Motives, 16.

85. Ibid.


87. Postman, Technopoly, 111.

88. The authors argue “the capacity for agency” occurs within “a dialogical structure, itself thoroughly relational.” Emirbayer and Mische, “What is Agency?,” 970–971, 974. Italics in original.

89. On the relevance of the term “automatic” to discussions of motion and agency, see Sobchack, “Animation and Automation,” 383.

90. Stanton and Reardon, WALL•E, Screenplay, 84.

91. Stanton and Reardon, WALL•E, Screenplay, 88, emphasis mine.


94. Ibid.
98. Alexander Woo, Interview by Albionson, Art of the Title, June 22, 2009.
100. Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 460.
104. Ibid.
105. Ibid.
110. Ibid.
112. Gitlin correctly cautions against pre-maturely summarizing “the so-called Internet age,” as “prophecies have a way of expiring quickly,” Todd Gitlin, Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms Our Lives (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), 212.