

3. In what ways can the science-fiction motif of the robot be used to map, assess and re-imagine social constructions of gender and gender roles in *WALL-E* (Andrew Stanton, 2008)?

Throughout science-fiction cinema, filmmakers have employed motifs to explore issues relating to society. One common motif is the robot which has been used to map, assess and re-imagine social constructions of masculinity and its role in society. In her analysis of masculinity in 'The Terminator' films, Susan Jeffords asserts that science-fiction cinema of the 1980s largely transcribed masculinity through spectacle and male bodies wherein the musculature and gritty toughness transformed them into vehicles of display.¹ The 1990s marks a shift in the exhibition of masculinity because, in place of muscularity and violence, science-fiction cinema presented a modest man who, instead of learning to fight, learns to love.² This model of masculinity wherein emotional trauma and ethical dilemmas can be explored was coined the 'New Man'.

Throughout Pixar's feature films, male characters have been presented as promoting new models of masculinity; a model which often matures into an acceptance of traits considered to be traditionally 'feminine'. Ken Gillam and Shannon Wooden observe that Pixar's male protagonists commonly experience a narrative trajectory that leads them from the position of alpha-male to the model of the New Man.³ *WALL-E* (Andrew Stanton, 2008), Pixar's first science-fiction film, follows this narrative structure but unlike other male protagonists, WALL-E creates gender fluidity in that he successfully balances the alpha-male and New Man masculinity by epitomising the alpha-male ideal of individuality whilst simultaneously exhibiting traits typically associated with femininity. In this way, WALL-E can be used to map, assess and re-imagine social constructions of contemporary masculinity and its role in society.⁴ This is because WALL-E, as a robot, highlights the performative nature of gender through his enactment of masculinity thereby demonstrating that gender is something learned and not something intrinsic to our biology (or construction in WALL-E's case) or programming, and can therefore be adapted to suit the needs of society.

¹ Susan Jeffords, 'Can Masculinity be Terminated?', in Steven Cohen, Ina Rae Hark, eds, *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, (London Routledge, 1993), p.245.

² Jeffords, p.245-246.

³ Ken Gillam, Shannon R. Wooden, 'Post-Princess Models of Gender: The New Man in Disney/Pixar', *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 36 (2008), 3.

⁴ David S. Braught, *In Light of Luxo: Masculinity, Fatherhood and the Hardest Bodies in Pixar*, (Emory University, 2010), p.33, and p.50.

Before discussing how the motif of the robot can be used to map, assess and re-imagine social constructions of masculinity and its roles in more detail, it is important to first discuss how WALL-E can be gendered as male.

As a robot, WALL-E is constructed as being asexual. So how is it possible for the spectator to interpret the character as male? Judith Butler asserts that gender identities are resultant of a 'stylised repetition of acts' enacted through bodily appearance and gestures which can be understood as the way in which individuals constitute an 'illusion of an abiding gendered self'.⁵ Although WALL-E's repetition of stylised acts is important in asserting his male identity and his role on Earth, I want to first explore how his presentation conveys his male identity.

In spite of WALL-E's name being shorthand for his designation as a Waste Allocation Load Lifter – Earth Class, it can be immediately linked to the male name Wally, thereby connecting him to the male gender. WALL-E's appearance is also connotative of typical masculinity, especially when he is considered in comparison to EVE who is obviously coded as female. Upon EVE's entry to the narrative she is immediately read as female because her sleek, pristine, curvaceous body denotes that of a woman. WALL-E can therefore be read as male as his body is angular with hard edges and centuries worth of grit and dirt. WALL-E's practice of replacing broken down components of his mechanical body can also be linked with men's habit of typically not spending as much time or money in maintaining entire outfits, instead only replacing each item when it becomes absolutely necessary. WALL-E's metal body is also connotative of the hardbodied masculinity exhibited in earlier science-fiction cinema as discussed by Jeffords.⁶ Therefore, these elements of his appearance all work to portray WALL-E as essentially male.

As aforementioned, WALL-E's repetition of acts codes him as masculine. Much like the male characters of previous Pixar features, WALL-E can be read as epitomizing the alpha-male ideal of individuality because his status as the only functioning robot on Earth conveys his self-reliance.⁷ WALL-E's self-reliance and solitary existence comes to the fore during the opening scene, particularly as WALL-E journeys through the dystopic waste-land that could have been New York or Los Angeles. His pace becomes jagged as he passes tall mounds of waste and the camera pans down to show the track around WALL-E's tires

⁵ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), p.140-141.

⁶ Jeffords, pp.245-262.

⁷ Brought, p.33.

disintegrating. WALL-E appears to take this impediment to his mobility calmly but there is a sense that he does not look forward to finding a replacement; an emotion which is amplified when it becomes apparent that the rubbish mounds surrounding him are interspersed with degraded WALL-E units. WALL-E looks uneasy as he surveys their remains and the film does not linger to show the act of his harvesting for spare parts. Instead, the film jumps forwards to show WALL-E back on his way with a new set of tracks. While WALL-E's singleness and self-reliance suggests the alpha-male, the emotion of this scene intrinsically links WALL-E to the New Man model.

The New Man emerged in the late 1980s and has been defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as;

A man who rejects sexist attitudes and traditional male role, esp. in the context of domestic responsibilities and childcare, and who is (or is held to be) caring, sensitive and non-aggressive.⁸

In his analysis, Braught asserts that WALL-E is established as an 'unquestioned' representative of the New Man from the 'get-go' of the film.⁹ WALL-E is a robot, unmistakably gendered as male, who spends his existence clearing up the remains of humanity's consumerism and watching (and dancing to) musicals. One musical in particular is important in WALL-E's formation of gender.

WALL-E opens with 'Put Your Sunday Clothes On' introducing, and immediately cementing in the mind of the spectator, the important role that Gene Kelly's 1969 musical comedy, *Hello Dolly!*, plays in the film and WALL-E's performance of gender. In spite of the traditional association of a love of musicals with femininity, WALL-E maintains his masculine identity. This is because WALL-E is seen to code his behaviour to match that of the male characters in *Hello Dolly!*. This is conveyed through WALL-E watching two particular clips. The first shows a big dance number. As WALL-E watches the dancers on an improvised television screen he begins to mimic the men's actions, even going so far as to retrieve a dustbin lid for use as an impromptu straw hat. This mimicking of stylised acts links to Butler's theory of gender in which she asserts that gender is a performance of repeated actions that can be understood as overtly masculine or overtly feminine. This emphasis on

⁸ 'New Man', *Oxford English Dictionary*,

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/245763?rskey=KvjxNb&result=1#eid> [accessed December 2016].

⁹ Braught, p.48.

performance makes the spectator acutely aware that WALL-E is *performing* gender – it is not something inherent to his physiology or programming, it is something learned.

Gender as something learned is emphasised by the second clip in which the central characters, Dolly and Horace, sing a duet which ends in their holding hands. The musical's influence on WALL-E's behaviour is illustrated by the film cutting in quick succession between WALL-E and *Hello Dolly!* as each of the respective characters hold hands. This sequence ends on a close up of WALL-E gazing longingly at the screen and holding his own hands together. This adorable act highlights WALL-E's position as the New Man model as his sensitivity and desire for companionship are highlighted.

Learning gender is further reinforced after WALL-E brings EVE back to his home to wait out the storm. While they get acquainted, WALL-E shows EVE his collection of artefacts, including the tape of *Hello Dolly!*. EVE unravels the tape and WALL-E panics, fixes the tape and then watches helplessly as the recorder buzzes to life. His fretting reinforces the importance of the musical because it suggests his reliance on it not only for company but also as the source of his identity. When the video springs to life WALL-E relaxes and makes a point of showing it to EVE. The handholding clip plays again, emphasising its influence on WALL-E's behaviour. The clip also influences EVE's portrayal of gender because WALL-E uses it to teach the assertive, over-aggressive robot how to be more feminine as suggested by his already occupying the male space.

Using the clips from *Hello Dolly!* illustrates that gender can be learned as WALL-E and EVE both adapt their behaviour to incorporate the masculine and the feminine. This enables the motif of the robot to be used to map masculinity as it suggests that, through performance, individuals can adapt their gender. This is because WALL-E incorporates the feminine to become representative of the New Man, while EVE, who is at first reminiscent of macho Sarah Connor, goes on to incorporate the feminine. This allows the motif of the robot to assess and re-imagine masculinity implying that, in order to be well-rounded, individuals must incorporate gender fluidity into their identity and embrace qualities from both the masculine and the feminine.

In spite of WALL-E's and EVE's possession of gender fluidity, through the gendering of WALL-E as explicitly male and EVE as explicitly female, the film can be linked to the bible story of the first man and woman. This is because EVE effectively impregnates herself with life when she stores the plant inside of her to ensure the future of humanity, meanwhile WALL-E takes up position as caretaker of Earth where humanity will once again make a

home.¹⁰ Although the reading of *WALL-E* as the story of Adam and Eve works to position WALL-E and EVE as explicitly male and female, respectively, WALL-E's duty to clear the world of debris left behind by humanity's insatiable consumerism ensures that he can still be read as a representative of the New Man model and therefore in possession of gender fluidity.

Cleaning is typically associated with womanly activities but WALL-E goes about his job in the most masculine way imaginable; by building towering structures that reduce mankind's accomplishments to pitiful attempts, thus portraying WALL-E as having an active role in the building of a better tomorrow. This portrayal of masculinity as possessing traits associated with both genders can be used to position WALL-E within an active sphere whilst simultaneously showing his compassion and sensitivity to the world he lives in as he cares for it.

Throughout *WALL-E*, it is made clear that WALL-E (and EVE) does not fit within the established dualism of male or female as he exhibits traits from both as a representative of the New Man.¹¹ In the same way, WALL-E does not fit within the dualism of man/machine. This is because, even though he possesses mechanical physiology, he also possesses the capacity for thought and emotion, so can therefore be read as a cyborg ('a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism') because he is mechanical in physiology but human in behaviour.¹² This reading is important for understanding how WALL-E can be used to map, assess, and re-imagine social constructions of masculinity because it links him all the more closely to humanity. Before I can discuss this mapping in more detail it is essential to explore WALL-E as a cyborg, particularly in relations to Haraway's assertion that cyborgs, as 'illegitimate offspring,' are 'exceedingly unfaithful to their origins'.¹³ This is true of WALL-E in that he begins life as an undifferentiated robot (as suggested by the presence of other WALL-E units and the scene in which, having been rebuilt, his initial programming reasserts itself) but breaks with his programming as he begins to collect and appreciate things that he finds. WALL-E also neglects his duties in favour of caring for the inactive EVE and abandons them all together when he mistakes her collection by the scout-ship as kidnapping. On the level of gender WALL-E's shift away from his initial programming is suggestive of gender fluidity and therefore has implications of abandoning the construction of masculinity

¹⁰ Braught, p.42.

¹¹ Braught, p.35.

¹² Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century', in David Bell, Barbara M. Kennedy, eds, *The Cybercultures Reader*, (USA: Routledge, 2001), p.291.

¹³ Haraway, p.293.

which social expectations have forced upon not only WALL-E but on us as well. For this reason, through WALL-E's embodiment of the motif of the cyborg, social constructions of masculinity can be mapped, assessed and re-imagined. WALL-E allows the mapping of masculinity as being fluid and interchangeable which is then assessed as being advantageous because extremes of gender are shown to be detrimental not only to us as individuals (WALL-E loses all sense of himself when he reverts back to an undifferentiated alpha-male) but as a race as well (the softbodied masculinity of the humans aboard the Axiom renders them incapable of achieving anything without robotic assistance). Therefore, the motif of the cyborg can be used to re-imagine social constructions of masculinity as necessarily having to find a balance between the two extremes of masculinity because they produce well-rounded individuals capable of adapting to society and its needs and are therefore better able to work to protect and cultivate it.

In *WALL-E*, the dominant motif of the robot is used to great effect to map masculinity because, by his very physiology, WALL-E is a highly constructed being and therefore brings attention to the constructedness of masculinity. The robot motif can be used to assess masculinity and its constructedness, providing an opportunity to illustrate the transformative capabilities of masculinity and the ability to adapt it to suit and benefit contemporary society. The transformative nature of the robot also works to re-imagine masculinity and its role in society because WALL-E shows how, by necessity, masculinity must possess gender fluidity in order to adapt for the betterment of humanity. Although WALL-E is coded as the New Man, I do not believe that this term refers explicitly to the new model of man upon which those in possession of a penis can take up; instead, because WALL-E is asexual, I take his position as New Man to be a representation of New Mankind.

WORD COUNT: 2,274

Filmography

WALL-E, Andrew Stanton, dir, Pixar, United States, 2008.

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