

The fictional world of *Wall-E* (Pixar, 2008) in 3 stages and 3 diagrams

Stage 1

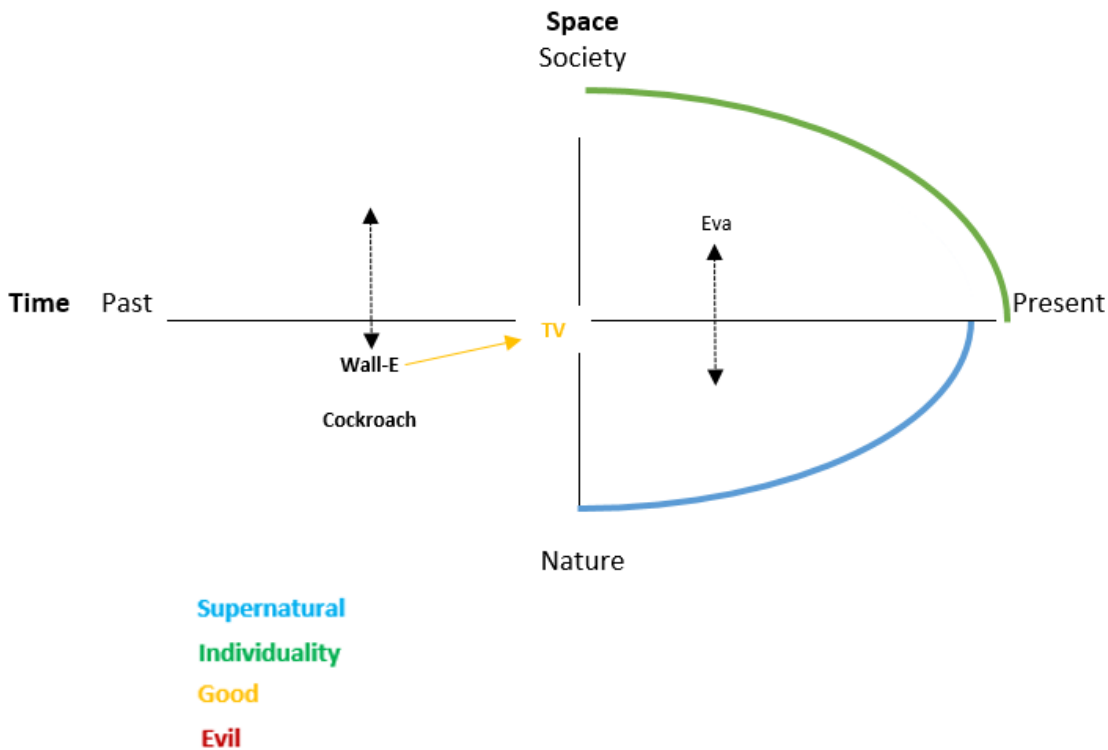


Figure 1

The movie starts by setting out the initial conditions and positioning the main hero, Wall-E, into the spatio-temporal scheme. Wall-E is a simple robot, designed to clean the Earth from garbage that has been accumulating due to irresponsible overuse of the planet's resources and the failure of the consumerist society that has left the Earth unable to sustain any kind of life – except for Wall-E's only companion, a cockroach, an insect typical of 'survival of the apocalypse' scenarios. From the very beginning, the hard working, accurate, friendly yet lonely Wall-E and his heartwarming relationship with the loyal and playful cockroach creates an immediate sympathy towards creatures which could otherwise be perceived as a 'senseless robot' and an 'unpleasant insect'.

Alone among Pixar heroes, Wall-E – with the cockroach – occupies the primitivist semantic field, due to his simplicity, both with regard to appearance and behavior. As to his appearance, in a world which has suffered from a post-technological apocalypse, he still looks grimly 'industrial'. As to his behavior, he is primitive in both a robotic and human kind of way: not only is his task as a robot very simple and repetitive, he also presents traits we would expect from a child or a simple person, such as naivety, imitative behavior, a simple taste regarding amusement, and basic singing and dancing. Initially, we see no other

clear motivation for Wall-E to perform his tasks but his state of being a programmed robot: he does his work calmly and finds humble joy in it, not looking for any further motivation nor questioning his purpose in life. In addition, Wall-E appears to be living in the past: not only is he a primitive robot, but the world around him has 'frozen' in time (the past as it was 700 years ago from the present moment in the movie). His actions on Earth therefore remind us of those of an archaeologist. He is literally 'digging in the past' and finding a wide range of artifacts. This too coincides with his semantic allocation in primitivism. The same is true for the cockroach: its simplicity and endurance in a 'post-apocalypse' scenario mentioned in the previous paragraph ensure its position in the field of primitivism.

As happens in many Pixar movies, the main semantic changes occur as the hero moves towards the affective bond. In *Wall-E*, the trigger to Wall-E's drive towards the affective bond is the old TV he owns. Through the jolly and romantic scenes of humans dancing, singing and holding hands that Wall-E watches the TV creates certain illusions and longing for companionship in him. Here we cannot be sure whether Wall-E has 'learned' this kind of behavior by imitating these scenes, or whether they have just helped him to recall something long-forgotten and natural. Whatever the answer to this question, the TV is perceived as something good, creating, molding or strengthening Wall-E's powers of affection.

Wall-E's primitivism and his capacity for affection makes for a stark contrast with Eva's landing on Earth. In the eyes of Wall-E and the spectator, Eva comes from an advanced future and is apparently driven by her duty, which is to find a living plant on Earth and ensure human return to Earth. Eva's future-orientedness and obedience to rules signals her distance with regard to Wall-E, as she occupies the semantic field of institutionalism. However, as soon as her spaceship leaves, she displays a momentary playful, almost careless behavior, flying around and enjoying herself, thereby indicating the possible semantic shifts she could be able to experience as the plot evolves. Moreover, she first befriends the cockroach, someone she has probably never seen before, and only then Wall-E, the robot. This is another sign that she could be driven towards the emotional affection that will be developing as the movie progresses.

During this first stage of the movie, as Wall-E and Eva gradually establish a friendly relationship, each of them occasionally occupies a variety of semantic fields: while Wall-E remains in the bottom-left position of the diagram, his chivalrous attitude towards Eva at times drives him towards traditionalism (upper left); in the same way Eva tends to be driven towards emotivism since she occasionally 'forgets' her task and enjoys time with Wall-E, displaying a wide range of emotions and human-like experiences (appreciation of 'art', protection, care, dancing etc.). These changes ensure variety without forcing Eva to leave her future-, nor Wall-E his past-orientedness.

On the whole, however, we still see her as a high-tech robot, devoted to her duty, controlled by directives from above. This becomes clear when Wall-E gives Eva a plant he has found, and thus proof of life on Earth: Eva incorporates the plant in her body, which reminds us of a woman's womb, automatically sends a message to the spaceship that brought her to earth, and, having fulfilled her mission, enters into deactivated state. Likewise, Wall-E proves the simple lover he still is: he mistakes Eva's return to the Axiom, the spaceship which brought her and where humans have been taking refuge from the polluted planet for over 700 years, for kidnapping. Accordingly, he tries to save Eva, abandoning the cockroach and

ending up in the Axiom along with her. It is worth mentioning that Wall-E does not understand Eva's mission and is driven solely by his emotional need and wish for a companion: his affective bond has led him to forsake everything else, which leads us to the second stage of the movie.

Stage 2

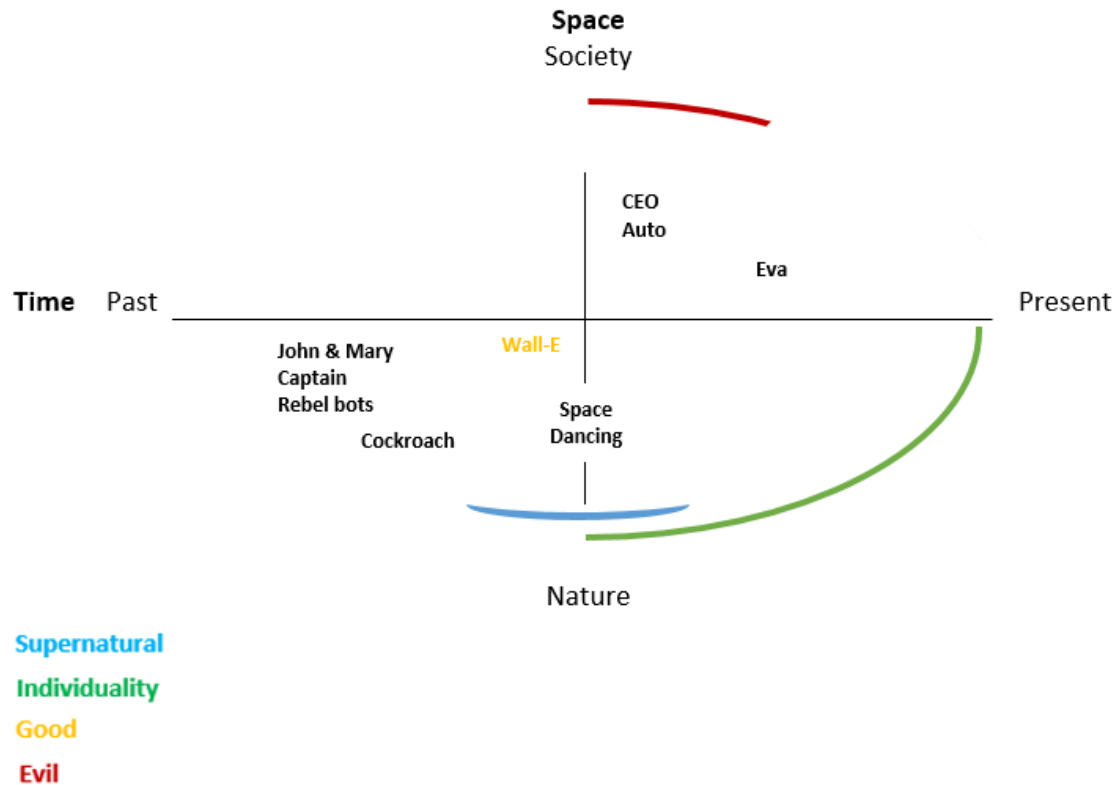


Figure 2

The second stage is semantically more complex than the first: when Eva and Wall-E arrive in the Axiom, they enter a world that is very different from Earth. It almost seems as if Wall-E had traveled forward in time. The Axiom itself functions as a self-sustaining micro-cosmos. Like Eva, it is defined by institutionalism: while formally commanded by a human captain, the real leader is a machine, the Autopilot, who rules over countless baby-like, brainwashed humans lacking physical and mental initiative and following omnipresent corporate interests. The very name of the ship, Axiom, indicates its institutional nature, a place where decisions are taken without any awareness of their actual motivation and thus without questioning. The hierarchy and vertical relationships between the passengers and the Captain/Autopilot are accentuated by the architectonic dimensions of the spaceship: Captain and Autopilot inhabit a room in a tower-like structure high above the other passengers.

However, while the Axiom's overall nature is one of strict institutionalism, the only inhabitant of the Axiom that truly belongs in this semantic field is the Autopilot. The captain of the Axiom is no more than a puppet

in Autopilot's hands: while nominally in charge, his only duty is that of making irrelevant announcements to the inhabitants of the Axiom. The important decisions are taken by Autopilot. All the other inhabitants of the Axiom – represented John and Mary – are primitivists due to their baby-like appearance, passive behavior and narrow worldview. They have turned into lazy, obese and helpless beings, unaware of their surroundings, let alone the system in which they live. They spend their lives moving around lying in automated chairs and interacting with each other in a virtual manner: no real, face-to-face human interaction or physical contact between passengers is depicted at this stage. They have no control over their lives and seem 'plugged in' into a system that controls virtually everything they do, from meal times to the color of their clothes. They are so passive and move so little that their bone marrow has receded and physically turned them into babies.

As Eva returns to the Axiom, her sense of duty and status prevail, whereas Wall-E still tries to 'save' her, thus causing chaos, but also initiating change, often in a comic fashion. As he is looking for Eva, Wall-E accidentally pushes John from his automated chair and turns off Mary's virtual screen. Forced from their screens, John and Mary look as if they had just woken up from sleep: disoriented, slowly adapting to 'unplugged' reality. From that moment on, their behavior starts showing emotions, friendliness and almost childish awe, as opposed to their previous lethargic, dull, bored appearance. These signs adumbrate the movement of humanity towards the affective bond. Wall-E also brings change to the rebelling robots of the repair ward in which Eva is to be serviced. The rebelling bots represent the Axiom's lowest social range, its marginalized, primitive part, but hence immune to the ship's institutionalism. When they are accidentally set free by Wall-E they hail him as their liberator and defend him against the security bots of the Axiom. Primitivism thus antagonizes institutionalism within the Axiom.

Wall-E's doings also reach Captain McCrea. After hearing about the plant Eva has brought to the ship, he gets very excited, but when Autopilot makes the plant disappear without anybody noticing, he quickly loses enthusiasm, happy that "things go back to normal", and occasionally playing, childishly, that he will bring back the Axiom to the Earth, daydreaming about being praised by his passengers for the return. This playful dream, as he imitates the landing of the spaceship on the Earth using a toy model, indicates a kind of incipient but as of yet insufficient growth, a tendency that will develop in the next stage as his rebellion against Autopilot moves him towards individualism.

The lowest point of the movie is also its turning point. Wall-E and the plant accidentally end up in the same escape pod and are nearly destroyed by Autopilot, who wants to get rid of the plant. Wall-E saves the plant for Eva, and she recognizes Wall-E as a partner in completing her task. This awareness drives her closer towards the affective bond and emotive individualism, as she allows herself to express emotions and feels she can take actions based on her feelings. Duty and feeling coincide here. This turning point in the movie is depicted as Wall-E and Eva spontaneously and harmoniously dance in space accompanied by quiet orchestral music. Simultaneously, John and Mary are observing this cosmic dance through the window and, by accidentally touching each other, enter a higher level of 'awakening' and affection, since they've only ever interacted through monitors. At the same time, the Captain is listening to the definition of 'dancing'. Altogether, this triple moment is filled with a kind of rapture and briefly places our characters in the semantic field of the supernatural, placing love on a 'cosmic' plane. The three simultaneous events mark a turning point in the movie and prepare us for the semantic shifts at the end of the movie: the 'ice'

of Eva's institutionalism and the different levels of primitivism of Wall-E, Mary and John, and the Captain has been broken and these characters are ready to move towards the affective bond and emotive individualism through the upcoming course of events. All these semantic shifts are the result of Wall-E's affection for Eva.

Stage 3

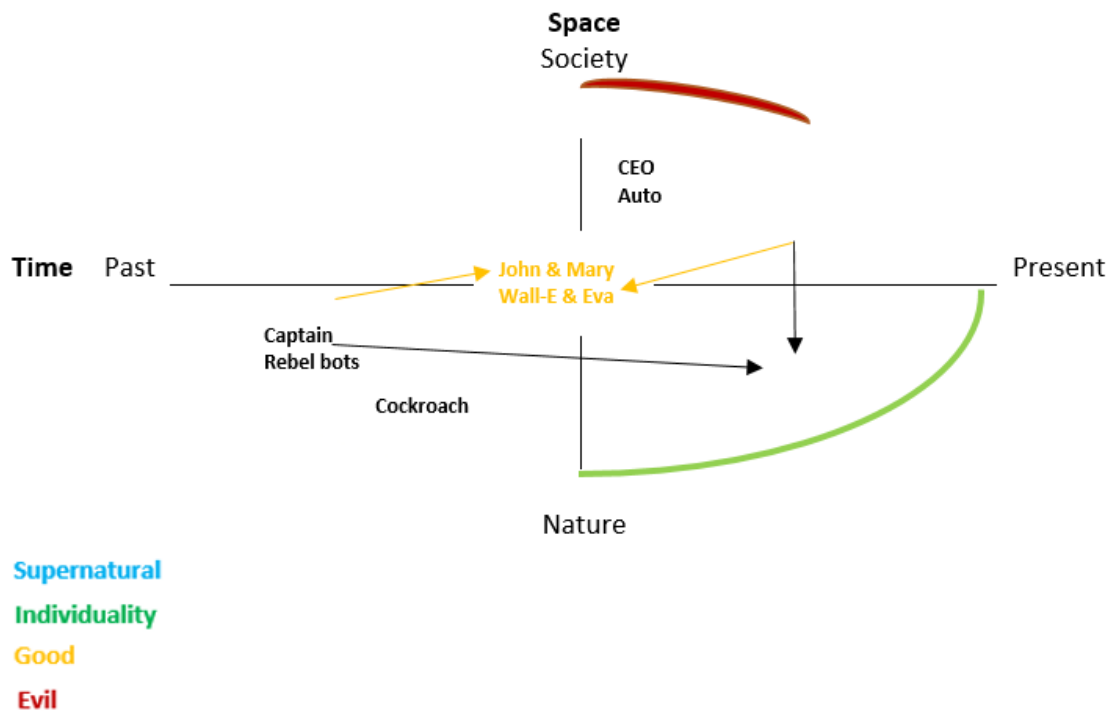


Figure 3

After this turning point, the third stage ushers in the final semantic shifts, definitely driving the characters towards the affective bond and emotive individualism.

The evil Autopilot preserves his position as the main antagonist in the movie, occupying the institutionalist field. In this final stage Autopilot's motivation and real nature become clear: superficially, he ensures his position as de facto commander by sabotaging the "operation recolonization", stealing the plant and doing everything possible to maintain his power over the captain, passengers and the course of events. However, "operation recolonization" was cancelled 700 years ago by the original generation of humans who thought that it would be too cumbersome to clean an earth turned toxic by unending consumerism and capitalism, and therefore transferred all ultimate authority on the Axiom to Autopilot. Autopilot's tyrannical behavior is thus no more than a human directive, itself the result of institutionalism expressed as radical market economy and consumerism. However, since we see consumerism and corporate interests still thriving in the Axiom (which itself was created as a business project), the only way to escape

the dreadful effects of these interests is to gain consciousness and literally lead a life not ruled by fear (Autopilot). In one way or another, this is what Captain McCrea will try to do.

The captain thus crucially supports Wall-E and Eva in their fight for the plant: without his rebellion against Autopilot, the awakening of his consciousness, determination, wit and even use of physical strength, the rest of the operation would have failed. The semantic shift that accompanies the captain's new worldview is imbued with Enlightenment principles: The Captain is driven from primitivism to emotive individualism through 'education' (as he learns about the Earth and how beautiful it used to be) and rising consciousness about himself and of the differential effect of his actions. His final rebellion – "I don't want to survive. I want to live" – shows a shift from institutionally motivated primitivism to emotivism. He's no longer boyishly playing with spaceship model and daydreaming about the return. He is now a real leader, even though visually he still appears primitive and comic: even in his most epic and heroic moments, as he tries to stand up to the tune of Richard Strauss' *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, ready to fight Autopilot with physical strength, he still looks like an awkward, oversized toddler.

During this third stage Eva's worldview also experiences important changes. Instead of the strict institutionalism and denial of feelings typical of stage 1 and part of stage 2, she definitely moves towards emotivism and the affective bond. She understands that her duty and feelings are not necessarily contradictory: what is more, after Wall-E almost 'dies' trying to help her, she is no longer angry or disappointed as she would have been in the previous stage. While technically she still strives to do her duty, her motivation has changed, even to the point where she is willing to give up her task to save Wall-E. This is clearly seen when Wall-E is seriously 'injured' after being locked in the garbage disposal: Eva throws away the plant to help him. However, since Wall-E can only be repaired on Earth, suddenly completing her duty and saving Wall-E amounts to the same thing, so once again duty and affective bond are seen to coalesce in the movie.

Wall-E's case is different. His motivation and semantic direction do not change throughout the movie. Even after the terrible events in the garbage disposal when urgently needed to return to Earth to be repaired, his motivation is still to help Eva, to be with her and satisfy his need for close emotional relationships. He remains a primitivist, but his position in the affective bond saves him from the childishness of the baby-humans. This is clearly seen during the last crucial events of the movie: while the captain is fighting Autopilot and the situation on the spaceship has gone out of control, Wall-E throws himself under the lowering holo-detector – where the plant has to be placed to be recognized by the Axiom and return to earth – without hesitation, slowly getting crashed and risking his life, once again for Eva.

In this final stage, John and Mary continue their journey towards the affective bond. During the final events, as the fight between autopilot and the captain threatens the Axiom with capsizing and humans are falling off their chairs and sliding into a huge pile, they save helpless babies. This is a sign that they have reached maturity and could be ready to become real fathers and mothers. It is worth pointing out that their newly-gained sympathy towards Wall-E is probably something new in their lives, not only because they have lacked real interaction with any other human, but also because they have been used to perceive robots merely as their servants. Therefore these small changes in their lives give way to

important and crucial shifts in attitude: Wall-E becomes their hero, almost a martyr towards a new, better life, and the whole 'society' of the Axiom, both human and robot, follow their view.