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## ***What WALL-E Can Teach Us About Global Capitalism in the Age of the Anal Father***

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### **Abstract**

This article employs the animated feature film *WALL-E* to examine a contemporary incarnation of paternal authority, the anal father of enjoyment. Slavoj Žižek coined the expression “anal father of enjoyment” to identify a metaphorical father who operates counter to Sigmund Freud’s oedipal (or primitive father). Unlike the oedipal father, the anal father does not command the subject to sacrifice enjoyment as a price for entry into the social order. Rather, the anal father directs the subject to enjoy excessively. This article reasons that the anal father figuration is a result of global capitalism. While a post-apocalyptic event, such as climate change, may destroy the planet, it does not end capitalism. Yet, *WALL-E* suggests that with the demise of the anal father, capitalism can be replaced with an alternative economic system.

**Keywords:** Žižek; Freud; Capitalism; Psychoanalysis; WALL-E; Anal Father

The notion of a post-apocalyptic landscape usually invokes images of *Mad Max*-type badlands where outlaws terrorize upstanding citizens, or it invokes images of lumbering hordes of zombies that populate urban cityscapes and feast off the remaining survivors. Among the survivors, a literal father figure appears to preside over the denizens of the new world. The means by which the father figure enlists survivors to come together to form the new society is by asking each survivor to sacrifice his or her own personal interests in favor of the “good” of the community as a whole. The individual’s willingness to sacrifice his or her personal interests is rewarded with the subject’s inclusion in the community.

Sacrifice in the post-apocalyptic narrative is reminiscent of the sacrifice mandate depicted in Freud’s primal scene. For Freud, after the son witnesses (either in person or through fantasy) the sexual congress of his parents, the son is prevented from pursuing a similar encounter with his mother by the father prohibiting the son from sexual enjoyment of any of the father’s women (his wives, girlfriends, daughters, and so on). The prohibition is so absolute that, as Lacan notes, even the *name* of the father is sufficient to proclaim the restriction on what the son may enjoy. The son’s submission to the mandate—the son’s agreement to sacrifice (sexual) enjoyment—is the price that the son would pay to remain within the family or tribe presided over by the father.

For Freud, the family or tribal unit is intended to be analogous with society as a whole. The primal scene narrativizes the subject’s experience of a (figurative) father’s commandment that, as the price for being included in a community, the subject must sacrifice personal interests in favor of the good of all. The post-apocalyptic narratives discussed above hew to a similar logic: community in the new world can only be obtained where the father successfully prohibits individual enjoyment in exchange for benefitting the society as a whole. The commandment in post-apocalyptic narrative is no different than President John F. Kennedy’s oft-quoted remarks at his January 20, 1961 inaugural address: “And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country. My fellow citizens of the world: ask

not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man” (Kennedy 1961: unpaginated).

This article analyzes the post-apocalyptic figuration of a contrasting paternal authority—not the father who asks his subjects for sacrifice but instead the more contemporary father figure who (seemingly) commands his subjects to *go enjoy*—by looking at a depiction of a post-apocalyptic society where the leader’s mandate appears to be the functional equivalent of President George W. Bush’s comments during a press conference two weeks after 9/11 where he implored the American people to “Go shopping...get down to Disney World in Florida,” and “take your families and enjoy life, the way we want it to be enjoyed” (“President Holds Prime Time News Conference” 2001: unpaginated).

There appears to be no better illustration of the impact of the commandment to “go enjoy oneself” than in the animated feature-length film *WALL-E* (Stanton 2008), which displays the super-morbidly obese passengers of a cruise-ship-type space vessel. The film leads us to believe that these portly passengers are the descendants of humans who vacated Earth over 700 years ago. While much of their predecessors’ culture has been lost, the passengers hold on to one vestige of their forgotten planet: a system of exchanging capital for goods and services. The passengers constantly consume the goods and services advertised to them even while they are adrift in deep space, confined to a single spacecraft, with no access to the resources of any planet to (presumably) enable their prolonged survival in outer space.

The unbridled consumerism depicted in *WALL-E* is slightly different from the form of capitalism we would recognize in our daily lives. There is no marketplace where vendors compete for business by offering a panoply of rival goods and services. In *WALL-E*, all goods and services are offered by one company, Buy 'n' Large Corporation (“BnL”), the same corporate entity that is operating the spaceship. The “marketplace” on the spaceship is a closed system, entirely monopolized by BnL, with no competition, by contrast with typical post-apocalyptic filmic incarnations, and no scarcity of resources to continue the production of goods and services.

The central curiosity of the BnL monopoly implicates a feature necessary for the perpetuation of capitalism beyond the free market that permits competition among

business rivals. In *WALL-E*, it is the promotion and advertisement of BnL's goods and services that engender the passengers' desires to make purchases of the goods and services offered to them. As the passengers travel throughout the ship on their personal hovercrafts (which are, in effect, hovering wheelchairs necessary for mobility since each passenger has over-consumed himself to a level of obesity that renders walking impossible), the passengers are bombarded with messages and images from BnL, whose slogan is "Buy, Shop, Live," recommending the next product of the moment that should be acquired.

BnL's slogan "Buy, Shop, Live" betrays the fantasmatic impetus behind each passenger's purchase of the latest food, drink, toy, and so on. As reflected in the slogan itself, "life" is the goal that can only be reached after one has shopped and bought. What is being purchased, then, is not any specific product that meets a particular subject's desire of the moment. The passengers are all consuming the same products, at the same time, as their fellow passengers. The incessant consumption suggests that there is something *more* to each product than meets the eyes, a fantasmatic component that goes beyond the purpose of meeting the passengers' individual needs to quench hunger, thirst, or boredom. What is being purchased here is life itself. Consumption is the sole means by which the subject can have a life (i.e., can participate in the society around her).

The film's depiction of a fantasmatic aspect to each commodity is driven home by the irony that each passenger on the ship appears to believe she is unique or different from other passengers, contrary to the fact that there exists a nearly uniform, simultaneous consumption by all passengers of the same products and services. The ship's hair salon is populated with various robots styling female passengers in the same three hairstyles, all the while doling out affected compliments as to the women's uniqueness by saying such things as "it's the new you!" or "stunning!" The point here is not that *WALL-E* depicts a shiplot of spacefarers who are enjoying themselves notwithstanding an otherwise miserable sojourn in deep space (a setting that in other post-apocalyptic films would be attended by the mandate for passengers to conserve resources such as food, water, and air). The point is rather that the passengers seem

to believe their preservation will only be enabled if they are at work enjoying themselves through consumption.

*WALL-E* is a far cry from a depiction of a community presided over by a father figure, such as Freud's primal father, who commands that the subject's duty is to sacrifice enjoyment in exchange for the benefit of society as a whole. Not only is there no depiction in *WALL-E* of a literal "father" who issues any commandment to the subjects, but also there are no (expressed, anyway) commandments of anyone's duty. The passengers appear to recognize independently what is their duty—their duty is to go about enjoying themselves.

Zizek has coined the expression "anal father of enjoyment" to describe a metaphorical father figure that contrasts with Freud's primal father of prohibition:

On the one hand there is the oedipal father: the symbolic—dead father, Name-of-the-Father, the father of Law who does not enjoy, who ignores the dimension of enjoyment; on the other hand there is the 'primordial' father, the obscene, superego anal figure that is real-alive, the 'Master of Enjoyment'... The order of succession described by Freud in *Totem and Taboo* (the murdered primordial Father-Enjoyment returns in the guise of the symbolic authority of the Name) is thus reversed: the deposed symbolic Master returns as the obscene-real Leader (Zizek 1994: 206).

For Zizek, neither Freud's father of prohibition nor the anal father of enjoyment are *literal* fathers. In each case, the term father is a metaphor for authority. Each type of authority is distinguished from the other by its relationship to enjoyment: the father of prohibition eschews enjoyment while the father of enjoyment commands it. The father of prohibition commands that the subject sacrifice enjoyment as the price for inclusion in the social order; the father of enjoyment commands that the subject enjoys herself as the price for inclusion.

There are two aspects to the type of enjoyment commanded by Zizek's anal father. The first aspect is its obscene and excessive nature. The sort of enjoyment associated with the anal father is not a mild, pleasant enjoyment but rather a level of

excessive overload that becomes unbearable. The enjoyment commanded by the anal father is a level of enjoyment in excess of pleasure. It is more enjoyment than the subject can bear.

The second aspect of the enjoyment associated with the anal father is its superegoic component. The commandment of the anal father to enjoy is superegoic in the sense that the subject experiences her own enjoyment as always falling short of the anal father's imperative. The subject is never enjoying enough to satisfy and comply with the mandate to enjoy.

The consequence of the mandate given by Zizek's father of enjoyment is depicted in *WALL-E* by the passengers' excessive consumption. Without a literal father commanding the subjects to go enjoy themselves, the passengers nonetheless find themselves in the thrall of a superegoic standard of measurement where an artificial intelligence perpetually determines that their own enjoyment falls short. Enjoyment is the fantasmatic connection between the subject and the goods and/or services that must be consumed. In order to come into or remain in existence, the subject must consume with an ever-increasing capacity.

The anal father is a modern development emerging from the materialization of late (or global) capitalism. Todd McGowan declares: "[l]ate capitalism functions by submitting all cultural life to the process of commodification, and this process can only be sustained if everyone is engaged in the endless pursuit of enjoyment, a pursuit that the anal father authorizes" (McGowan 1998: 54). George W. Bush's command to shop and travel illustrates McGowan's contention that everyone must participate in the pursuit of enjoyment for late capitalism to function. The iconic miniature red, white, and blue flags planted in front of homes across the country were some of the first commodified objects of 9/11.

During this same press conference, a journalist, seemingly functioning under the auspices of the primitive father, asked President Bush why he did not call for the U.S. public to make sacrifices during the War on Terror, as citizens were required to do during World Wars I and II. President Bush responded:

I think the American people are sacrificing now. I think they're waiting in airport lines longer than they've ever had before. I think that...there's a certain sacrifice when you lose a piece of your soul...So America is sacrificing...I think the interesting thing that has happened, and this is so sad an incident, but there are some positive things developed—that are developing. One is, I believe that many people are reassessing what's important in life. Moms and dads are not only reassessing their marriage and the importance of their marriage, but of the necessity of loving their children like never before. I think that's one of the positives that have come from the evildoers. ("President Holds Prime Time News Conference" 2001: unpaginated)

Perhaps the most telling and finest elucidation of the anal father mandating enjoyment is President Bush's assertion that demonstrating one's affection to a family member is a form of sacrifice. The post-9/11 subject is not asked to give up sugar, gasoline, coffee, or nylons like those during World War II, but rather, she is reminded that it is her patriotic duty to partake in "fun" activities such as consuming. While on the other hand, something that should be fun but is a source of anxiety for many, spending time with loved ones, may be avoided.

Similarly, the Axiom passengers in *WALL-E* are regularly reminded by the ship's computer they must engage in the "fun" axiom of consuming. Their sacrifice involves relinquishing procreative and parental responsibilities and ignoring their limited "freedom" of choice. Even though the anal father's mandate is ever present, the ship's computer needs no false narrative (i.e., the stability of the country's economy is dependent on the subject's consumption) to convince the passengers to consume. The subjects, based on centuries of vacuous gluttony and sloth passed on by their ancestors, merely need a visual cue from the ship's computer to know when and what to consume. Freed from choice, the passengers float around the ship consuming predetermined goods, interacting with other passengers via hologram rather than in person, and producing mountains of trash.

While the Axiom's passengers readily accept their limited choices, the present-day subject recognizes his limited choices and attributes this to his failure to "live up" to

the anal father's mandate. This admission is brought about as a result of the anal father's proximity to the subject. McGowan contends that unlike the primitive father, the anal father eschews distance from the subject. For example, during the 2000 U.S. Presidential election, many voters found George W. Bush's likeable folksy nature an important feature in a president. When polled, these voters indicated Bush was the candidate they most wanted to share a beer with. As the quintessential embodiment of the anal father, Bush's everyman appeal brought him closer to the subjects for which he presided over. This closeness, however, burdens the subject, who feels he is not fulfilling the anal father's mandate to enjoy. McGowan asserts "this over-present anal father constantly reminds the subject in the society of enjoyment that she/he has failed to really enjoy—to enjoy in a way that the ideal ego (i.e., the anal father himself) does (McGowan 1998: 56). The burden of not living up to the anal father's mandate leads the subject to pursue other objects, which he believes will bring him the adequate level of enjoyment commanded by the anal father. Hence, the subject purchases new commodities.

For the real-world subject, however, his relationship with the commodity is a frail thing—a car, for example, is no longer the "be-all and end-all" of his existence. No writer is capable of being a genius on his own. It follows that no writer's product merits the elevation of a thing into the be-all and end-all that completes him (as the modernist masterpiece was frequently celebrated for its rare greatness and genius). What has replaced the commodity is a culture of commodification. In his seminal book *Postmodernism: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* Fredric Jameson observes that: "In the postmodern culture, 'culture,' has become a product in its own right; the market has become a substitute for itself and fully as much a commodity as any of the items it includes within itself..." (Jameson 1991: x). In this way, Jameson can explain that postmodernism "is the consumption of sheer commodification as a process" (Jameson 1991: x).

One way to understand this is that instead of watching television, the postmodern subject wants to film and post to YouTube, Instagram, or Snapchat her own video clips (or movies)—the commodities the postmodern subject desires are commodities that allow her to produce more commodities. Another way to understand this is that



everything has been commodified—everything can be bought or sold for some monetary figure—nothing is off limits to commodification. This destroys the value in a commodity—it can never be elevated or cherished as more than a commodity—and as a result:

[e]verything can now be a text in that sense (daily life, the body, political representations), while objects that were formerly “works” can now be reread as immense ensembles or systems of texts of various kinds, superimposed on each other by way of the various intertextualities, successions of fragments, or, yet again, sheer process (henceforth called textual production or textualization). The autonomous work of art thereby—along with the old autonomous subject or ego—seems to have vanished, to have been volatilized. (Jameson 1991: 77)

What is at issue here is precisely the loss of transcendence of the commodity. Under modernism, the commodity transcended (and typically led to great disappointment from the subject). Under postmodernism, there is no belief in a commodity’s ability to be transcendent.

The devotion to global capitalism is not just a belief created out of necessity or historical tradition, and it is not just “any old” ideology

<sup>i</sup>. Global capitalism is a totalizing ideology, an ideology that spreads everywhere and immediately takes root. Typically, an ideology can be described as totalizing when the ideology provides for not only what needs to be believed, but also a means for maintaining and supporting that belief system (“proof” that this is truly how the world works—and that the ideology is not merely an arbitrary belief system, but rather it is reality, or a part of human nature itself).

Global capitalism is more than sufficient as a successful and pervasive ideology. The “rightness” of global capitalism goes unchallenged in the media. No candidate for federal office in the United States ever mentions restricting capitalism’s expansion (even left-leaning, self-proclaimed democratic socialist, U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders, only speaks of tempering the free market’s inherent inequalities and harsh treatment of the poor, working, and middle classes). For most people today, the market is consistent

with human nature—everyone acts in her own selfish, self-interest, and she thereby—if not magically—benefits those around her, and to ask people to conduct themselves other than selfishly is to ask people to act counter to their God-given nature.

Scrutinizing the subject's pursuit of enjoyment presents an opportunity to better understand the functioning of free market ideology and global capitalism. Fabio Vighi emphasizes the endless quest for enjoyment creates circumstances that make it impossible to challenge capitalism:

[L]et us briefly consider the pervasiveness of the ideological function of enjoyment in our world. My overarching point is that the injunction to enjoy has become such an irresistible and totalizing ideological category precisely because, by feigning a non-ideological function, it prevents the concrete constitution of collective political projects which may seriously challenge capitalism. It is because of the subtle but nonetheless hegemonic injunction to enjoy that today we are unable to even imagine the formation of social spaces and practices alternative to those imposed by capital. (Vighi 2010: 15)

Vighi's remarks affirm Zizek's oft repeated quip that it is "easy to imagine the end of the world—an asteroid destroying all of life, and so on—but we cannot imagine the end of capitalism" (Carlygs 2011: unpaginated). Global capitalism enables the subject to pursue enjoyment, even though she understands her enjoyment comes at the price of exploited labor.

When a series of employee suicides occurred at Apple parts supplier Foxconn, a Taiwanese-based corporation with factories in China, the consuming public lodged few complaints, as doing so would have interfered with the release of the iPhone 4. Even as some called for Apple to force Foxconn to improve worker conditions, consumers balked at the idea of paying more for their iPhones to improve said working conditions at Foxconn. Arguments ranged from the suicides were well below China's national average, to Foxconn (and by proxy Apple) has enabled millions of Chinese to move into the middle class.

These rationalizations gave leave for any culpability for contributing to the work conditions and enabled the consumer to enjoy her iPhone without fully questioning the ethics of the iPhone's production—from the minerals necessary for the components being harvested in war-torn African countries, to the inhumane 12-hour, six-day work weeks imposed upon assembly workers in China, to the army of Apple store employees who earn slightly above minimum wage in the U.S.

When the anal father commands the subject to enjoy, the subject mistakenly believes the avenue by which to obtain enjoyment is by obeying the commandment. But the endless quest for enjoyment from the commodity undergirds the ideology behind the global capitalistic system. Vighi explains the subject's consumption as follows:

Particularly with global capitalism, we enter a "post-historical" era dominated by the ubiquitous injunction to consume in excess (from ordinary material products to—increasingly—lifestyles, fashions, cultural/spiritual/sexual experiences). *What we consume is irrelevant; it only matters that we continue to consume.* The first thing to notice about this overwhelming and yet subtle command is that it leaves us as disorientated as the proverbial punch-drunk boxer: it disables us from understanding our predicament itself. (Vighi 2010: 11)

This predicament, a punch-drunk disorientation, contributes to the subject's increasing awareness of her own incompleteness. No matter how much the subject consumes (obeys), it is never enough. The subject constantly sees the other as the source of her incompleteness. The other impedes her ability to fulfill the anal father's mandate. The subject's inability to "live up to" this mandate to enjoy by consuming leads to frustration, which manifests in aggressivity.

Jan Jagodzinski notes "that aggressivity and hyper-narcissism are symptomatic of postmodern 'designer' capitalism and the consumerist society it has wrought, a society now governed psychically by an Anal Father as the authority of the Oedipal Father begins to fade away" (Jagodzinski 2001: 30). Besides alienation, another explanation for this aggressivity stems from the challenge to paternal authority that ensues from the rejection of the oedipal father's controlling presence. Jagodzinski

continues by asserting that "the core of male hysteria today emerges with the loss of authority that the traditional Oedipal Father [Freud's primitive father] once carried. With that loss comes the enjoyment of the anal father and the accompanying aggression which this brings" (Jagodzinski 2001: 31). Todd McGowan concurs with Jagodzinski:

The emergence of this new father has direct repercussions upon the state of aggressivity within contemporary society. For all the talk about aggressivity and violence rising in response to the absence of fathers (and the Father), what has been missed is the seemingly ubiquitous presence of the new anal father and its effects upon aggressivity... ( McGowan 1998:53)

McGowan goes on to say that the recent rise in aggressivity is not from abdication of paternal responsibility as some of the 1990s Promise Keepers argued, and more recently what conservative pundits assert as the cause for rioting after police violence, but in response to "a new kind of [anal] father being born on the cultural landscape" (McGowan 1998: 53). Aggressivity comes because, under the ever present command of the anal father, the subject is persistently reminded of the other's enjoyment and how the subject is not enjoying (cannot enjoy) at the same level. The subject either seeks to control the other's enjoyment, such as passing legislation that bars the other from the perceived means of enjoyment (Planned Parenthood defunding efforts being a cogent example), or the subject reacts violently toward the othered persons perceived to be enjoying in excess.

The necessary context for these critics' observations about aggressivity lies with the difference between the oedipal father and anal father. Although neither the oedipal father nor anal father are literal fathers, both function as an authority that mediates the relationship between the subject and objects in her environment. For purposes of the aggressivity analysis, what matters is the apparent progression from the commandment of prohibition to the commandment of enjoyment. For Jagodzinski and McGowan, society has evolved from the rule of the primitive father to the rule of the anal father, and now subjects view a surrendering of enjoyment as a loss of their inscription into the social order rather than as the price they must pay for inclusion in the social order. For

McGowan in particular, this change in the subject's relationship to the father is attended by the subject's retreat from a situation in which the subject might be called upon to surrender full enjoyment.

For McGowan, the subject's retreat from situations where the subject might be called upon to surrender enjoyment is best illustrated in how social gatherings that used to occur in public spaces have increasingly moved to private spaces. McGowan notes how the shared and egalitarian nature of public space itself requires that the subject be willing to share the public space with his neighbors while the private space allows the subject to exclude anyone or anything that might demand the subject compromise on what the subject wants.<sup>ii</sup> This new private space, this little island, can be observed in the passengers of *WALL-E*'s Axiom ship. McGowan's contention is evidenced by the passengers' hover wheelchairs, which are equipped with holographic computers screens that obscure the occupant's view 270 degrees, ostensibly preventing them from observing actual events around them. The passenger is so ensconced in her own virtual world created in the hover car that she becomes her own little virtual island. Her self-contained and self-satisfying mobile island enables her to consume every item advertised, thereby permitting her entry into the social order. This is demonstrated in the first scene with the character Mary. While traveling on a transport tram, Wall-E, a Waste Allocation Load Lifter Earth robot, interrupts Mary's Skype-type conversation about her love life so that he can ride next to EVE, an Extraterrestrial Vegetation Evaluator robot, who is now in a torpid state. Wall-E does something no other human has done so far: he speaks directly to Mary. It requires suspending Mary's telecommunication device and hologram screen, after which, Wall-E introduces himself. Then, Wall-E does something no robot has done so far: he asks for Mary's assistance. She adjusts her hover chair so that he can ride next to a hibernating EVE. Mary's consent to Wall-E's request sparks within her awakening, and she subsequently unearths the world beyond her virtual hologram. She discovers the ship's swimming pool; she gazes at the stars from the observation deck; and she finds a new love interest, John. Mary's evolution highlights the false promise of heightened enjoyment in the private sphere.

One might expect the subject's retreat into the private sphere to correspond with an increase in the subject's enjoyment. However, McGowan observes that the subject's retreat into the private sphere is only accompanied by an ever-increasing desire by the subject to control and enlarge the subject's means of enjoyment. When the subject is ultimately confronted with the reality that the subject still cannot attain the impossible goal of full enjoyment, the subject experiences the lack of full enjoyment as a mistake in the social order that should be corrected. The passengers of the Axiom ship experience no greater level of enjoyment as they retreat to their hover chairs and initiate interpersonal communication through electronic devices. Once they recognize they are not enjoying, the passengers of the Axiom stage a mutiny against Auto (short for autopilot) to free themselves from the hover chair islands they have created. Similarly, the real world subject's response to his failure to enjoy in the private sphere engenders discontent. The subject's relationship with the perceived defect in the social order often manifests itself as aggression towards others.

Aggressivity is the mode where the subject expresses the subject's frustration with her own lack of full enjoyment by projecting the cause of her lack of full enjoyment on to other people and situations. One example of this can be seen in an airline passenger's use of the 'Knee Defender' during a flight from Newark to Denver. The passenger installed the plastic device—which is used to prevent the person in front of the passenger from reclining his or her seat—on his passenger tray. When the woman in front of him tried to recline her seat, a fight ensued and the flight was diverted to Chicago to remove both passengers.

Aggressivity is manifested when the female passenger had the hysteric belief that if something is given to her (i.e., a reclining seat), she must enjoy it—even at the expense of the passenger behind her. The male's hysteric belief was that he, a six-foot-one-inch man, was entitled to enjoy the flight without his space being invaded by the woman in front of him. Both passengers felt entitled to a perceived comfort by the airlines, even though airlines have consistently reduced seating space so that they can fit more passengers on fewer flights. Both passengers imagined the other was enjoying at his and her expense, and both passengers demanded that the other make a sacrifice of enjoyment.

The device, the Knee Defender, is marketed as a passive-aggressive means to take the other's enjoyment. The device comes with a "courtesy card" that the purchaser can use to inform the passenger in front of the purchaser's intent to use the device during flight. The card reads:

I am using Knee Defender. Knee Defender is a small plastic device that helps me protect myself by limiting how much the seat in front of me can recline. I wanted to let you know about this and provide the following information:

\_\_\_ Unfortunately, my legs are so long that if you recline your seat at all it would immediately bang into my knees.

\_\_\_ As best I can estimate, you could recline your seat about \_\_\_ inches without banging into my knees. If you would like to recline your seat this much at some point during the flight, please let me know and I will adjust my Knee Defender so that is possible.

\_\_\_ If you would like to recline your seat at some point during the flight, please let me know and I will try to adjust myself and my Knee Defender so that it can be done safely.

I realize that this may be an inconvenience. If so, I hope you will complain to the airline. Maybe working together, we can convince the airlines to provide enough space between rows so that people can recline their seats without banging into other passengers.

Thank you for your understanding. ("Knee Defender" 2006: unpaginated)

The purchaser is given an option or options to check before presenting the card to the other passenger. Yet, the language in the courtesy card never gives the passenger sitting in front of the purchaser the option to comply or not comply with the request. In fact, the card is not a request at all, but an order for the passenger in front to give up her perceived enjoyment.

One last point worth mentioning: the passenger also experiences a hysteric response to the airline. By the airlines consistently reducing seating space to maximize their profits, the passengers encounter less private space.<sup>iii</sup> Aggressivity ensues from

the perception that the other is encroaching on the subject's private space. The airline is misconstrued as the other who is enjoying a profit at the subject's expense.

In the closed economic system presented by *WALL-E*, the passengers of the ship are not called upon to sacrifice for the broader welfare or survival of the community. Instead, the film presents a social order that is replete with abundance (meaning, in Marxist terms, a lack of scarcity of desirable commodities). Because the subject does not have to sacrifice, aggressivity from the passengers is non-existent. In fact, aggressivity only materializes from the robots and the artificially intelligent Autopilot when the passengers try to escape their virtual wheelchairs. This observation bespeaks the actual role of the robots in *WALL-E*. The passengers sacrifice agency for convenience, leaving the burden of manufacturing fantasy and desire to the ship's artificial intelligence. This can be seen when the ship's computer motivates the passengers to change the color of their onesie uniforms, an action completed with the push of a button on their hover chairs. The computer announces: "attention, Axiom shoppers. Try blue. It's the new red." Next, images of svelte, attractive models wearing the new blue uniforms are projected overhead and on the passengers' telescreens. They all dutifully press the button on their chairs that turn their uniforms blue and collectively gasp at the new hue.

This scene illustrates the means by which capitalism creates necessity where none is needed. The passengers neither desire nor need blue uniforms. Yet, based on a series of algorithms, the ship's computer elicits from the passengers the desire and need to change uniform colors, drink meals from a cup, or play virtual golf. It is the same fantasy and desire that motivates the passengers to depose Auto and return the Axiom to Earth after a 700-year journey. Desire and fantasy sustain the capitalist system, both in global capitalism and the closed BnL capitalist system on the Axiom. Where aggressivity derives from scarcity in the real world, desire and fantasy substitute for scarcity on the Axiom. Desire and fantasy become the catalyst for aggressivity—first through the robots and then through the passenger's mutiny.

The robots ensure passengers fulfill the anal father's axiomatic mandate to enjoy by enlisting fantasy to conceal his judgmental gaze and by eliciting desire to incessantly consume. In this way, the robots bear the burden of the anal father's disapproval, and



thus experience anxiety. Their anxiety is manifested in several forms, from the passive-aggressive behavior exhibited by M-O—the Microbe Obliterator who keeps the Axiom pristine—when Wall-E contaminates the ship with foreign soil, to Auto’s malevolent actions to ensure the passengers never return to Earth.

Wall-E disrupts the social order by inaugurating an era where passengers become aware of the primitive father’s mandate. Fantasy and desire are no longer dictated by the computer, but determined by the passengers. As a case in point, the passengers disable Auto and return to Earth. The planet is still barely habitable for any life form beyond Wall-E’s friend the cockroach. Yet, the passengers believe they can rise up from their hover chairs, clean the planet, plant crops, and flourish in their new world order. Their fantasy and desire of playing virtual golf is replaced with growing “pizza plants.”

The film ends with the passengers on wobbly footing, disembarking from the ship. During the rolling credits, we see an animated-title sequence where silhouettes of the returnees’ descendants, grow fit and active. We also see a society that must sacrifice enjoyment—as commanded by the primitive father—by abandoning the luxuries of the Axiom. The robots help humans plant crops and repopulate the waters with fish. Meanwhile, the ship becomes a proxy for the anal father, ignored by the passengers’ descendants and allowed to languish in the background. The implication of the anal father’s demise is that capitalism is no longer necessary, and a communal realm where everyone shares and the planet returns to its Edenic grandeur is paramount for their survival.

*WALL-E* teaches us that for global capitalism to fail, it may not necessarily require the end of the world, but it most certainly requires the end of the anal father. The actions of a small foreign robot draw the Axiom’s passengers from their private island and spurr them to pursue their notions of what the primitive father commands.

## Notes

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- i Jameson uses the term “late capitalism.” “Global capitalism” is used in this article relating to *WALL-E*—though one could just as easily call it “late global capitalism”—because such critics as Todd McGowan now refer to late capitalism as global capitalism. Yet, the distinction between “global” and “late” is little more than a formality. “Late” describes the form of capitalism that follows the failures of socialist experiments in Eastern Europe and Asia. The West lessens the harshness of capitalism by providing regulatory controls (worker safety rights, minimum wage, consumer safety, etc.). In this sense, everyone in a capitalist society understands they exist in a “late” capitalism world (except for the libertarians who would do away with all regulation over the market, a prospect that even conservatives run from). But the term “global” invokes the notion of globalization, the slow, but nonetheless tireless and dogged march around the world of the West’s commodities and services. For this reason, “global capitalism” will be used in this article because it more accurately implies the pervasiveness of the current state of capitalism.
- ii Perhaps the most easily recognizable example of this is President Donald Trump’s use of Twitter’s block feature to exclude those users he does not like.
- iii Airline seat size and pitch space has been reduced to such an extent that the U.S. Court of Appeals sided with the consumer advocacy group Flyersrights.org and ordered the FAA to reconsider the advocacy group’s petition to create “minimum seat standards to prevent airlines from further reducing legroom and seat width” (Martin 2017: unpaginated).

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