

Animating Reality Colleen Montgomery

Virtual Betamax: Pixar as Digital Archive

The increasingly pervasive use of digital animation across a range of media—from film to video and online games—is radically reshaping animation’s place within the culture of the moving image. As a pioneer of computer generated animation technologies (both in the field of special effects and animated feature filmmaking), Pixar has played a central role in the popularization and proliferation of digital animation. If we are indeed entering a new era of ‘virtual world building,’ Pixar has no doubt helped to pave the route towards such a shift—both through its continued development of computer rendering technologies and by dint of the critical and commercial interest that the studio’s work has generated for the animated medium.

Yet, inasmuch as Pixar in many ways represents the optimization of digital animation technologies and the creation of new animated worlds, it also inscribes within its films and other animated media a critique of the virtualization of culture as well as a nostalgia for obsolete and archaic technologies. This seeming incongruence is perhaps best exemplified in Pixar’s *Wall-E* (Andrew Stanton, 2008) a film that employs of state of the art digital rendering capabilities (at least for the time of the film’s production), yet simultaneously paints a stark portrait of so-called virtual ‘world building’ and betrays a deep-seated scepticism of technology’s utopian promise.

In *Wall-E*’s dystopic vision of a post-Earth human society, hyper-media saturation and immersion in virtual reality environments densensitize and radically dehumanize the individual. Perpetually plugged in and logged on to computer screens and video chat programs, clothed in digitally rendered attire, educated by virtual projections and even soothed in infancy by holographic mobiles, all facets of human life and social interactions are mediated by a virtual interface. This techno-media immersion is envisioned here as a digital annexation of the body both dispossessing the subject of individual agency and disintegrating the fabric of social and community bonds. Ironically, Pixar, a company with corporate ties to and a vested interest in Silicon Valley, thus creates in *Wall-E* a form of Silicon Wasteland—made manifest in both the cultural wasteland of the spaceship and the film’s depiction of a post-human earth littered with skyscrapers of debris, dilapidated projection screens, and other scattered forms of digital refuse.

Wall-E also serves as an apt illustration of Pixar’s proclivity for archaic and outmoded media and technology—and particularly devices/forms rendered obsolete by the digital/virtual. In the first place, Wall-E himself—a clunky and beaten up robot—can be interpreted as a type of outmoded technology. Moreover, Wall-E’s treasury of disused objects—a cabinet of curiosities counting everything from CDs, to a mechanical eggbeater, a Rubik’s Cube and a prized Betamax copy of *Hello Dolly* (Gene Kelly, 1969)—arguably functions as a virtual showcase of abandoned or obsolete pieces of material culture which are quite literally *reanimated* here in a form of digital archive.

While perhaps most pronounced in *Wall-E*, Pixar’s championing of the analogue, the disused and the *démodé*—of technologies increasingly replaced by digital processes—and its often deeply cynical perspective on the rise of digital media/technology, crops up in numerous other Pixar works. The *Toy Story* series’ nostalgic depictions of old-fashioned and discarded toys (such as the Etch-a-Sketch, the Slinky Dog and the Fisher Price ‘Chatter Phone’), *Cars*’s (John Lasseter and Joe Ranft, 2006) wistful sentimentality for the late 1950s heyday of Route 66 (essentially an outmoded transportation route), and *Monsters Inc.*’s (Pete Docter, 2001) critique

of the digital retooling of industrial labour, all reflect a similar tension in Pixar's work. I thus propose that while Pixar, on the one hand, exemplifies the increasingly animated/virtual nature of media forms, on the other, it reveals digital animation's recuperative capacity to operate as a form of digital archive for the cultural/material artefacts rendered obsolete by 'virtual realities.' Pixar therefore complicates our perception of animated realities—at once engaging us in the visual spectacle of highly complex digitally rendered worlds, yet simultaneously problematizing our relationship to digital technologies and to the increasingly digitally manipulated environments in which we live.