

NOW AND ALL ARE IMPORTANT:  
A POST-STRUCTURAL CRITIQUE OF HUMANISM,  
ALDO LEOPOLD'S "THE LAND ETHIC,"  
AND DISNEY/PIXAR'S WALL-E

by

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## ABSTRACT

Feelings of hopelessness and meaninglessness have become hallmarks of American society. As a filmmaker and film educator it is clear I share a responsibility to address these defining issues. Using some of the ideas of Zygmunt Bauman, Jacques Derrida, Neil Evernden, Claude Levi-Strauss, Bill Nichols, Nell Noddings, José Ortega y Gasset, Edward Said, and Erwin Straus, I observe this problem to be a result of dispassionate humanism—a machineworld story considered appropriate in the current social construction. From this critical perspective, I then analyze Aldo Leopold’s The Land Ethic and the Disney/Pixar film WALL-E. The former I show to be written in such a way as to leave its audience confused. The latter I demonstrate fosters unnecessary and immoral assumptions about the “imminent” collapse of our civilization. In conclusion, I make clear that it is how we relate to our current existence that is important. While the power of our ideas is truly humankind’s greatest creation, that power is naught outside of time and the realities of our being Earth-bound. What we must learn to value in America alongside the power of ideas, are the responsibilities inherent in simply being.

## AN ALTERABLE EMPIRE

Meaninglessness

While traveling in Iceland last summer, one of my filmmaking students asked an engineer who is co-owner of a geothermal energy company: How had Iceland gone from being nearly medieval in his grandparents' generation, to now being a country with one of the world's highest standards of living, with citizens who are rated the happiest on Earth? He replied: "We made education our priority." Earlier, he'd told us that eighty percent of the energy people use in Iceland comes from Iceland, and that he thought "other nations ought to strive for that." He'd said: "I think Iceland is a showcase of what is possible to do."

His emphasis on word the "possible" caught my attention. It seemed oddly hopeful, sort of naïve, but at the same time I could tell he wasn't an unsophisticated person. And when he made that comment about education being the foundation of Iceland's success, I really didn't know what to think. Part of me was elated; I felt vindicated to be a teacher. Another part of me was confused by this man's... hopefulness.

Hopefulness is not something I regularly encounter in the United States of America. I believe many people here struggle, if rather unmindfully, with what Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl, in his 1959 book, Man's Search for Meaning, termed "the feeling of total and ultimate meaninglessness of their lives" (128). Frankl theorized this resulted "from a frustration of our existential needs which in turn has become a universal phenomenon in our industrial societies" (164). He said in a survey of his European students, "25 percent showed a more-or-less marked degree of existential vacuum." Among his American students "it was not 25, but 60 percent" (129).



This extensive feeling of meaninglessness in America, coupled with our national faith in regeneration through violence<sup>1</sup>, renders sentences like the following in The New York Times “Movies” section on May 16, 2008, commonplace in our society: “The apocalypse came early to the Cannes Film Festival this year, filling screening rooms with snarling dogs, bursting bombs, shouting men and screaming women.” In other words, it is reasonable in our society to assume that some sort of apocalypse is imminent.

### The Immorality of Denying Choice

In his book Liquid Modernity, published in 2000, Zygmunt Bauman writes that people today are “living in a present which wants to forget the past and no longer seems to believe in the future” (128-129). He continues:

Whoever willingly or by default partakes of the cover-up or, worse-still, the denial of the human-made, non-inevitable, contingent and alterable nature of the social order, notably of the kind of order responsible for unhappiness, is guilty of immorality—of refusing help to a person in danger (215).

Many of us might consider the social order inalterable, for it rests upon presumptions that stretch back into antiquity. Yet Neil Evernden, in his 1985 book, The Natural Alien, makes comprehensible this idea of a social construction being but one possible “reality” when he writes:

Man’s freedom lies primarily in the choosing of his ‘story’, rather than his actions within that story. And once having chosen a locust-story as his own, the apparent range of choice is delimited by that central theme; we can only choose what seems ‘sensible’ to a locust (132).

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<sup>1</sup> As per Richard Slotkin’s Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860.

Clearly, widespread belief in an imminent apocalypse or an overall sense of meaninglessness is not as simple as “having chosen a locust-story as our own.” We all live within tangles of innumerable stories and most we’ve inherited. But Evernden’s idea helps us understand that what we believe is determined and often limited by the stories we’ve chosen, especially ones that we can’t make sense of, or that leave us without options, for those are the ones that abet hopelessness. And so it is unmistakable that whenever an institution such as the The New York Times publishes an article like the one excerpted above, it pushes us a little further back into a seemingly hopeless corner, and further restricts our ability to commit ourselves to working towards a healthy future. Referencing Bauman, to assert otherwise is to shirk one’s responsibility—which of course is easy enough to justify in a social construction where nothing is going to matter. Thus we see that telling stories has ethical implications.

The truth of the matter is that what is made, can be re-made—differently. And surely we humans may not be able to deflect a comet or asteroid headed towards Earth, and the already drastic shift in the level of carbon and particulates we’ve let loose into the atmosphere may eventually limit many species’ ability to thrive on this planet, and certainly humans will always make mistakes and behave inconsiderately. But if we can change our thinking, if we can understand there’s plenty of reason to believe our lives have meaning—a belief that comes from our belonging to a community that is greater than us—we’ll be able to put aside our existential vacuum, and work towards a long and healthy future for all life on this planet.

In his 1991 book, Representing Reality, Bill Nichols writes that documentary films—and it seems reasonable to me that all films to some extent—exist within “discourses of

sobriety,” systems that “can and should alter the world itself,” ones that “effect action and entail consequences.” Nichols writes: “They are vehicles of domination and conscience, power and knowledge, desire and will.” (3). Films have consequences, and as Bauman asserts, those consequences have ethical implications. As a filmmaker and film educator, in other words, I see that I have a real responsibility not to create work that abets hopelessness. Consequently it is obvious that my two-fold task must be to first understand what stories within the social construction depress hope, and second, to tell the stories I create in ways that don’t have the same effect.

### Father’s Prototypes

Nell Noddings, in her 1984 book, Caring: A Feminist Approach to Ethics and Moral Education, offers us a way to begin to understand the workings of the social construction when she writes:

One might say that ethics has been discussed in the language of the father: in principles and propositions, in terms such as justification, fairness, and justice. The mother’s voice has been silent ... caring and being cared for, which I shall argue form the foundation of ethical response, have not yet received attention except as outcomes of ethical behavior (1).

This “language of the father” that Noddings mentions is what our present-day civilization was built upon. It is a worldview loosely termed humanism. Mary Klages writes:

‘Humanism’ is ... a perspective that rejects anything supernatural as an explanation for existing phenomena. [It] argues that what we can observe with our senses can be explained by human investigation and thought [and it] forms the basis for what would become in the Western world the concept of ‘science,’ the idea that observation and deduction are sufficient means for understanding how the world works and how things happen, without reference to any kind of divine or extra-human power (10-11).

Inherent to humanism is a presumption that we humans, and especially our thoughts, are fundamentally separate from, and superior to, every thing and every creature on this earth. Additionally, because humanism rests upon ideals, it makes implicit the concept that ideals actually exist—external to our thoughts. José Ortega y Gasset, in his 1944 course, Sobre la razón histórica, elaborates:

Under the influence of Greece, reason began as a search for the being of things, where “being” meant something fixed or static, the being that each thing already was. The prototypes for this being were concepts and mathematical entities, with their invariable being, always the same. Since reason recognized material things were subject to change, it had to find something unchanging amidst the change, something that remained itself. It called this something the “nature” of a thing. And, in fact, what the physical, chemical, and biological sciences seek in phenomena is permanent being, their “nature.” Hence the failure (Historical Reason 222).

Ideals are emotionless, inhuman entities to have at the base of one’s worldview. They make it easy to justify being inhuman. We don’t care about caring. We care about disembodied justice, or what laws there “are” that will unemotionally (painlessly?) allow us to justify our actions.

### Separation and Perversion

Another requirement of humanism is that we be “objective” observers, which denies subjecthood to whatever it is we’re observing. In his 1966 book, Phenomenological Psychology, Erwin Strauss confronts this idea when he writes:

All looking and being looked at is a lapse from immediate communication ... the voyeur does not participate in reality in any direct sense but only by way of the objectifications, i.e., reflected knowledge. He makes the Other into an object in and for itself’ (219).

Neil Evernden works deeper into the problem when he writes:

Perhaps the consequences of the ‘stare of objectification’ are most easily illustrated in ... [the] ‘sex object’ ... the conversation is thwarted and the woman is at risk ... Her defenses are removed as completely as those of the domesticated animal ... Objectification is the second and essentially perverse action of the voyeur, along with keeping his distance” (93).

The social construction, largely still based upon the worldview termed humanism, where much of Science resides, is perverse at its core. What’s more, it has separated us from the community of life on this planet, and from everything else outside of our “fantasy of the exact.” Ironically it posits all phenomena must have some sort ideal “nature” while at the same time denying the supernatural. Its aspiration—our aspiration—to understand the essential as it fits into in the universal continues to this day as physicists debate string theory, M-theory, Loop quantum theory, the holographic universe—different theories competing for the solution to the “ultimate” problem of physics: “finding a single theory to unify all the forces of nature” (Cabot 1). Luckily, less than a hundred years ago, a Swiss linguist named Ferdinand de Saussure, unintentionally offered us a few thoughts that now help us out of this dark fantasy.

### Over Reaching

Saussure died in 1916. His Course in General Linguistics was published posthumously, based on lecture notes taken by his students at the University of Geneva. At first glance, it is still a humanist quest, still seeking the invariable being at the core phenomena, so that it can be properly categorized within the universal ideal, and perfectly understood. In Saussure’s case, the sub-category of the universal ideal was human cognition, and the phenomena he studied were in the structure of our languages. In classical humanism, language is what we use to communicate ideas. We, as “independent” selves, not “logically”

dependant upon any physical thing, think thoughts and then use language to describe those ideas. But, according to Saussure, language precedes ideas; it is what allows them to form as they do. Language itself is not a thing, it is a structure. “We don’t originate language,” explains Klages. “We inhabit a structure that enables us to speak” (49). Structuralist analysis makes our belief in ourselves as “the” storyteller—as the originators of ideas—vanish. Thus it handily detaches us even further from our “objective” research. We, the independent selves, may still tell and receive “stories” but these stories come from a structure we all share. Saussure called the basic unit of this structure a sign, which is composed of two parts, a “signifier,” and that which it points towards, a “signified.”

Claude Levi-Strauss, a Parisian anthropologist who from 1935 to 1939 studied various Indian societies in western Brazilian state of Mato Grosso, was in a significant way the person who took humanism out of the frying pan and put it into the fire. Levi-Strauss, with a tip of the hat to Georg Hegel, the German philosopher whose exhaustive work in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century gave Levi-Strauss his back-story, argued that by using more advanced forms of structural analysis we could objectively understand what humans in different cultures have in common. He argued that not only are all human worldviews structured as linguistic binaries such as white/black, male/female, objective/subjective—where the signifier to the left of the slash is valorized over the one to the right—they are structured by myth as well, and the smallest irreducible unit of myth—its invariable being—he called the mytheme. It is an idea that provides an interesting new way of looking at ourselves, and structuralism in general is really a fantastic tool for analysis. The problem is that Levi-Strauss contended his research was objective, in essence machine-like, completely unswayed by any human emotion, the way to “correctly” think within humanism. But because his findings

were so specific on the one hand and so extended into the universal on the other, his “objectivity” got stretched beyond what other people could overlook.

### Speaking Phallocracy

Jacques Derrida, a French intellectual born in north Africa in 1930 (and always marked as an outsider in France by the Algerian accent of his youth), finally pointed out at a conference in 1969 that Structuralists can’t help but impose an order on reality—hiding potential assumptions and meanings—because their work comes from within the structure itself. In other words, it is not just the storyteller who vanishes with structural analysis, it is also the myth of objectivity. Derrida pointed out that structuralism’s “new” method of understanding still operated within the confines of the same old humanist story of us looking at them. In the case of structuralist analysis, the “us” was us pretending we objectively structure language, and the “them” was our idea of independent pan-cultural “selves.”

Derrida went on to assert that the main assumptions of the old story remain in place, and then he began to deconstruct those when he pointed out they were part of a phallocratic, patriarchal, and masculinist paradigm inherited from Judaism and Hellenism. Humanism, the idea we had that people might one day properly understand the unchanging nature of everything, has for the past forty years been challenged by people calling for us to recognize our own subjective worldview, and for us to accept that our social construction is ever-changing.

### Bricolage

This new work, less concerned with delusions of the ideal, was termed by Levi-Strauss and Derrida to be “bricolage,” and the person who does it a “bricoleur.” “A bricoleur doesn’t care about the purity or stability of a system he or she uses, but rather what’s there to get a particular job done” (Klages 61). A bricoleur might say, “Why should we subsume our critical project to one mode of thought?” Though I personally feel bricoleurs will forever labor in the long shadow of humanism, I have to admit they bring us amazing insights. For example, consider how different humanism’s assumption of separation is, from Nell Noddings’ “feminist” idea below:

If relatedness rather than aloneness is our fundamental reality and not just a hopelessly longed for state, then the recognition or fulfillment of that relatedness might well induce joy ...

Further, when joy arises out of the non-human world, it may tend to sustain me as one-learning or one-investigating, and this will be important to us as we explore caring for animals, plants, things, and ideas (134).

Caring and relatedness to the non-human world? These are simply revolutionary ideas.

To explore another example, consider the following paragraph written by Edward Said, one of the foremost “post-colonial” bricoleurs. If we make a few simple additions (underlined and bracketed below) to Said’s work, it starts to become evident just how applicable it is to this discussion. In the introduction to his 1993 Culture and Imperialism, Said writes:

Stories are at the heart of what explorers, novelists, [and filmmakers] say about strange regions of the world. The main battle in imperialism is over land, of course, but when it came to [which humans thought they] owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who kept it going, who won it back, and who now plans for its future—these issues were reflected, contested, and even decided in narrative. As one critic has suggested, nations, [and even worldviews] are narratives” (xiii).



Using this idea, and with the perspective offered thus far in this paper, we can see how even we in the “First World”<sup>2</sup> can be considered post-colonial victims of “Western Thought”—thought that has overrun its inferior binary: “the natural world.” The argument is that it is our way of thinking about nature, and not nature itself, that has been colonized by an unjust worldview, namely humanism.

With this idea we can understand that if someone asserts “the point of science is to conquer/control/manipulate nature, which makes science itself an imperial exercise” what they are doing is making the odd assumption that nature could ever be subordinate to man’s “idea that observation and deduction are sufficient means for understanding how the world works and how things happen” (Klages 11). Nature, or that which is outside of our human ideals, undeniably exists on an order of magnitude countless times greater than our science. It is the epitome of human hubris to believe our science is an imperial exercise. We need to climb down off that high-horse and understand that science is just our systematized process of seeking to understand what we don’t know. We’ve the power, perhaps, to annihilate a significant percentage of life on this planet with our weapons and choice of lifestyle, but that simply means we’re bad neighbors and idiots rather than imperial. Post-colonial bricolage affords us a way into this idea, and hopefully one day it will be part of what frees our understanding from the throes of arrogance and dominance where it now exists.

Said writes:

One of imperialism’s achievements was to bring the world closer together, and although in the process the separation between Europeans and natives was an insidious and fundamentally unjust one, most of us should now regard the experience as a common one. The task then is to describe it as pertaining to Indians

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<sup>2</sup> A term that obviously valorizes certain groups over others, and yet one still in wide and unconscious use in our society.

*and* Britishers, Algerians *and* French, Westerners *and* Africans, Asians, Latin Americans, and Australians despite the horrors, the bloodshed, and the vengeful bitterness (xxii).

As filmmakers concerned with ethically representing the alterable nature<sup>3</sup> of the social order, we might rephrase that message like so:

One of humanism's, or as it is more commonly described, Western Thought's, achievements, for which science is in many ways responsible, is that it eventually brought us humans closer to everything else. Human understanding of what the French Philosopher Giles Deleuze calls "the multiple" is now better than it has been at any point in the history of our species. We humans are now at least beginning to understand how all life is related and intertwined, and how humans actually are members of the living community (even if our language has not yet become re-structured enough for us humans to more gracefully speak and more broadly understand this awareness). And, although the process of Western Thought brought a separation that was and remains an insidious and fundamentally unjust one, most of us ordinary human citizens should now regard the experience as one we commonly share with the rest of the living community. The task then, is to describe this separation, as well as the process and experience of it, in terms pertaining to humans and the multiple, despite the horrors, bloodshed, and vengeful bitterness.

In other words, our task as filmmakers, from a post-colonial point of view, despite all the horrors, bloodshed, and vengeful bitterness of our separation from everything else that humanism brought us, is to describe our interdependence, and our common dark history, in terms that pertain to all members of the living community.

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<sup>3</sup> The assumptions of humanism in the structure that enables me to write are pervasive.

## BRILLIANCE AND FAILURE

Standing on Tradition

It should be clear by now that this paper to some extent orbits issues particular to my pursuit of a graduate degree in what is called science and natural history filmmaking. This is a discipline still very much in its infancy, and it resides at an odd crossroads between the redoubtable—and still very humanistic—concerns of the natural sciences, and the fervent bricolage of the arts. As such, it relies heavily on the traditions of science and nature writing. Yet from what I've conveyed thus far it should be clear that there are profound risks in simply re-versioning old stories. As an example of this, let's take a closer look at one the most respected science and nature books ever written: Aldo Leopold's A Sand County Almanac, published soon after the author's death in 1949.

In the most famous section of the book entitled "The Land Ethic," Leopold writes: "Abraham knew exactly what the land was for: it was to drip milk and honey into Abraham's mouth. At the present moment, the assurance with which we regard this assumption is inverse to the degree of our education" (240). There's been some recent—though perhaps sophistic—academic debate as to what Abraham knew exactly, but regardless, Leopold, who received his Master's degree from Yale in 1909, seems to be fairly sure that dripping milk and honey into Abraham's mouth is not what the land is for. In this, Leopold meets my expectations of how a science-communicator should behave. He's smart, he's witty, he's telling the other side that they've got it wrong. I infer he's got it right. This makes sense to me, and I might re-tell the story like so: "Educated people know the land is not just for human benefit."

Automaton Blues

When I read Leopold's next paragraph however, I notice the presumptions of humanism start getting in my way of ethically re-telling this story. Leopold writes: "The ordinary citizen today assumes that science knows what makes the community clock tick; the scientist is equally sure he does not. He knows that the biotic mechanism is so complex its workings may never be understood" (240-241).

I'm concerned that Leopold has termed the living community a "biotic mechanism," because it converts what might be termed the vast mysteries of nature into the oft-used and overly-simplistic analogy of a man-made machine. I'm pleased that he's modest enough to admit our understanding has its limits though. If I had to re-tell the story combined in those two paragraphs exactly as Leopold wrote them, I might do it like so: "Educated people, especially scientists, are nearly sure the land is not just for human benefit. We citizens should not assume that science understands everything about the biotic mechanism; scientists are certain it is so complex they may never understand it."

That's actually a familiar storyline in this field. It is certainly the one "The Land Ethic" rests upon. A scientist wisely lecturing ordinary citizens about how science only somewhat understands how complex the machine is. From a humanist perspective, even though the science of ecology has greatly matured over the past sixty years, one could say that Leopold got it mostly right. And on a whole, "The Land Ethic" is inspiring. It is a beautifully written call for us to enlarge "the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land" (239). It urges us to have "respect" for "fellow members" "of the land-community" (240). Leopold writes that it is inconceivable to

him that “an ethical relation to land can exist without love, respect, and admiration for land, and some high regard for its value.” And by value he means “something far broader than mere economic value.” He means “value in the philosophical sense” (261). The breadth of Leopold’s understanding and his passionate and righteous call for a deeper personal obligation to what he calls the “biotic community” is a model that science and natural history filmmakers could easily spend a lifetime striving for in vain. But, upon closer inspection, considering the unjust assumption of separation and the perversity of objectivity that has delimited our worldview for thousands of years, there’s definitely something about “The Land Ethic” that absolutely doesn’t work. It is schizoid.

By my rough count, Leopold describes land in terms of something alive, such as a community, or a being, or a team, twelve times over the course of the chapter. He describes it in purely mechanistic terms such as circuits, fountains, structures, and pyramids twenty-eight times. Even when he’s not describing land he puts on nearly every page phrases like, “The mechanism of operation is the same for any ethic” (263) or “The releases of biotic capital tend to becloud or postpone the penalties of violence (255), or “Agriculture, by overdrafts on the soil, or by too radical a substitution of domestic for native species in the superstructure, may derange the channels of flow or deplete storage” (254). To which I want to respond: Can’t a few engineers be called in to fix those deranged channels in the (non-Marxist) superstructure? What is there to respect about biotic capital? Is Leopold asking me to embrace an ethical mechanism of operation—or to put myself inside it?

What Leopold seems blind to is that we ordinary citizens are never going to care about land in an ethical way—no matter many recent “discoveries in mineral and vitamin nutrition reveal unsuspected dependencies in the up-circuit...” (258), no matter how

interdependent with “it” he commands us to be, or however right he eloquently and correctly explains doing so may be, because “land” in the story Leopold tells is more often a machine than not, and no one can feel any true ethical obligation to a machine, not even in these times of extreme technophilia.

### Machineworld

And it is not just Leopold who gets this wrong back in 1949. Consider this July 2008 excerpt from one of the veritable bastions of “how it should be done”—a National Geographic magazine article entitled “An Uneasy Eden”<sup>4</sup> about Kingman reef in the central Pacific Ocean: “To Sala the message is clear: Overfishing is ecological sabotage. “It is like removing vital parts from a machine and expecting it to keep functioning,” he says. At Kingman, the machine still has all its parts”(153).

The National Geographic Society’s current mission is to “Inspire People to Care about the Planet.” So why, if they really want us to care, are they telling us that one of this planet’s most “undisturbed” coral reefs is a machine? The obvious answer is that story is what is “sensible” to say from within our delimited worldview. From within a social construction founded upon prototypes of mathematical entities, it makes sense that the true nature of this world is timeless, mechanical perfection. Because we’ve chosen a machine-world story as our own, to reference Evernden and Noddings, we use the language of the father to describe Kingman reef as a collection of rationally emotionless parts.

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<sup>4</sup> Please note that title’s reference to yet another “story” with a grim ending—stretching from Eden in the Old Testament to Revelations in the New Testament.

Because we still can't really believe—or tolerate—the notion that we're belong within Earth's living community, that we're not somehow special, non-dependent selves superior to everything but our thoughts, we're having trouble grasping the importance of the fact that we're currently manifesting one of the most substantial extinctions of life in the history of this planet. Most of us probably think that kind of “apocalypse” is not “going to be” a good thing, but because this “biotic mechanism is so complex,” most of us would avoid any prolonged discussion of that. It leads nowhere. Some authors, such as David Quammen, in his Song of the Dodo, make an eloquent case for the loss of biodiversity not being good for the long-term health of life on Earth. But his words are ultimately meaningless because their concern is the physical world separate from the permanent nature of our thoughts. That permanence, those immaculate conceptions, are really the only "things" that we can consider important from a humanist perspective. We, the avatars of our ideals, scientifically, emotionlessly understand that species come, and species go. And if our species has to go... so it goes. It can't be helped. It must be the unchanging “nature” of humans to outstrip this planet's ability to support them. Certainly these are not concerns we “ought” take any time out of our busy lives to “try” to do anything about. This whole world is a machine after all. It doesn't mean anything. And we're just parts in that machine. Why should we care? Indeed, *how* can we care?

Almost everything about this situation—the state of mind possible within the social construction—is insane. And yet we who have the power to change this go on ignoring that insanity—mostly because we're unaware of it. But it is undeniably insane that 46% of the 512 pesticides sold worldwide are particularly hazardous for humans and for nature (Hopwood). It is obviously insane that nearly sixty years after Leopold wrote “The Land

Ethic” calling for us to become part of the community, we still say “humans and nature” as if they’re two separate things. It is insane that when I go to the hot springs, as I did tonight, half the people I see walking around are holding in their stomachs—worrying about how they objectively look compared to some air-brushed magazine cover ideal—as if they could look anything other than somewhat miserable and definitely affected holding in their stomachs. When the story we’ve chosen is “the world is a machine,” when one’s worldview is perversely objectified, everything, everyone, every body becomes a meaningless mechanism appropriate for an uncaring, disembodied, humanist “I” to authoritatively critique.

In the last paragraph of “The Land Ethic” Leopold writes:

By and large, our present problem is one of attitudes and implements. We are remodeling the Alhambra with a steam-shovel, and we are proud of our yardage. We shall hardly relinquish the shovel, which, after all has many good points, but we are in need of gentler and more objective criteria for its successful use (225-226).

The steam shovel, the polio vaccine, all of our various “implements,” do have their many good points. We, considering the ill health of many this planet’s “ecosystems” (or what we should probably call “sub-communities”), are in need of gentler criteria for their successful “use.” Our present problem is absolutely one of attitudes. But, it is precisely more objective criteria that we don’t need. “Objective” in this sense means impartial and unbiased, and as such “The Land Ethic” is just another perverse call to think we’re not related to this world, and that it, and even ourselves, are not worthy of our care. The criteria we need, the kind Leopold would have done better to call for, the kind filmmakers would do well to popularize, is the kind of criteria that opens the door to our finally being able to imagine a



healthy future for this planet's living community, criteria entirely based upon caring and relatedness—which brings us back to Nell Noddings.

### Mattering Versus Essentialism

What I find most remarkable about Noddings's work is its sweeping kindness. From within the social construction, her idea that “the one-caring must be maintained, for she is the immediate source of caring”(105) is simply astonishing. In the humanist worldview our thoughts are like lords in heaven but real flesh and blood people with needs and feelings don't matter in the least. Auschwitz is a testament to that. Noddings's ethic is based on fallible human striving, rather than a perfection which is, of course, impossible to attain. That we must maintain ourselves as the source of caring is so amazingly prescient—and so contrary to the deeply engrained traditions of humanism—that it is breathtaking. It means we matter. It means we're not meaningless parts of an impossible-to-understand machine.

Noddings writes:

What ethical need have women for God? I do not mean to suggest that women can brush aside an actually existing God but, if there is such a God, the human role in its maintenance must be trivial. We can only contemplate the universe in awe and wonder, study it conscientiously, and live in it conservatively. Women, it seems to me, can accept the God of Spinoza and Einstein. What I mean to suggest is that women have no need of a conceptualized God, one wrought in the image of man. All the love and goodness commanded by such a God can be generated from the love and goodness found in the warmest and best human relations (97).

Renaissance-era<sup>5</sup> scholars mightily struggled to find “the” way to fit burgeoning science within a reality heavily-structured by the traditions of their Church. They failed, and

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that use of the term “Renaissance,” because of the “re-,” links “European thought”—an over-simplification—to that of the Greeks, Romans, Persians, Arabs, etcetera, creating an unwarranted mandate for the “superior,” though even less

humanist science became the dominant underpinning of the social construction we still maintain. The Holocaust and the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki had not yet happened when Friedrich Nietzsche wrote:

God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? (Nietzsche Reader 224)

Within a social construction founded upon mathematical prototypes, there is no place for a supernatural God, nor refuge for the humans who wretchedly, grandiosely claim they killed “him.” Nietzsche wallows in imagined horror. His idea that the “death” of God would lead to the loss of any universal perspective on things, and along with it any coherent sense of objective truth (Lampert 17-8) is completely unreasonable. There are many religions and conceptions of a supernatural being among the people scattered across this Earth, and any lawyer can confirm that whatever sense of truth we might ever have is never objective. And yet, with the loss of our culture’s dominant way of making sense of the world, and with no replacement forthcoming, it could be argued that some Westerners have lost their minds in the resulting sense of meaninglessness. Nietzsche’s idea that we all have to become gods remains a surprisingly relevant way to describe things like mass murder, especially when compared to mass-murder during the Crusades dealt versus now. All that’s changed is we’ve gone from one broadly-held, essentialist, belief system to another, a Christian one to a nihilist one, and both are subjective and false (but not false because they are subjective).

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accurate term: Western Thought. Après la naissance would be the more just and accurate phrasing. Of course, Aprèsnaissance would be good too.

Noddings writes:

The ethical self does not live partitioned off from the rest of the person ... there is no way to disregard the self, or remain impartial, or adopt the stance of a disinterested observer. Pursuit of an ethical ideal demands impassioned and realistic commitment (100) ...

It is not realistic, nor kind, to call ourselves “the murderers of all murderers.” It is not realistic to consider becoming gods simply to appear worthy of bleeding to death the (almost) holiest and mightiest thing we’ve ever imagined.

“Everything depends,” Noddings writes—in contrast to Nietzsche’s der Wille zur Macht—“on the will to be good, to remain in caring relation to the other” (103). This placing of relationship before principle is again completely revolutionary in the polished halls of Western Thought. As we daily rebuild those halls, Nodding’s thoughts provide directions towards a more hopeful, healthier, and more meaningful future.

Leopold got some of his land ethic right, especially the part about our need to respect the fellow members of this community. Yet he missed the fact that his call for more objective criteria actually disassociates us from his larger goal: ethically caring. In fairness, we should remember it is an easy mistake to make. We humans, especially us “ordinary citizens,” because of thousands of years of tradition of mostly men amassing power and concluding that “we” exist in some way independent of this world, are so deeply sure of objectivity’s requirement that it seems unreasonable to us to imagine a world-view—a story to choose as our own—where objectivity is not completely appropriate. Yet a worldview based on life’s connectedness, inherent relatedness, and caring—qualities that are now nearly completely disenfranchised from a feminist perspective, and fetishized from a post-colonial one—is clearly more rational than the one we currently believe and follow.

## A MACULATE CONCEPTION

Reinforcing Dispassionance

To close out this essay I'll analyze a recent film to illustrate the current that a post-humanist, filmmaking bricoleur needs to swim against. Again, I consider it reasonable to think that there's infinite variation in the degree of "domination and conscience, power and knowledge" that any film can have across the spectrum of this art form. It is unmistakable for example that the animated Hollywood blockbuster WALL-E, which has grossed nearly half-a-billion dollars worldwide, which sets a solar-powered trash-compactor as a protagonist in a post-apocalyptic world, is as much responsible for influencing the worldview of its audience—especially children—as any of the more traditional "documentaries" that might fall within Bill Nichols' estimation.

WALL-E is set 700 years in the future, long after "the"<sup>6</sup> obviously unavoidable collapse of our civilization and the equally inevitable annihilation of most other life on Earth. For those who maintain that collapse, death, and rebirth frame a hopeful narrative—I only partially agree. In an idealized, one-step-removed sense WALL-E obviously is a film about the unchanging nature of hope—that hope springs anew, no matter what happens. But this definition of hopeful, removed from any emotion, echoes the idealized concerns of humanism. As with most films, WALL-E's truth claims are implicit. Its animation and sound design, at least on future Earth, are heart-breakingly realistic. The collapse of our civilization

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<sup>6</sup> My use of quotes around the definite article "the" is intended to designate that despite the requirement of English grammar, any future apocalypse is currently not anything but a thought which we can choose to provide with power or not. It is interesting to note that some might mistake this use of quotes as designating a particular apocalypse, among the many.

simply will happen, and given that reality, WALL-E can be read as just as humanist as Nietzsche's Also sprach Zarathustra, and just as self-indulgent as his caterwauling about God's demise. There is hope in resurrection, that's inarguable. But there is meaninglessness in dispassionate, responsibility-absolving, expectations of collapse. That post-apocalyptic opening scenes of WALL-E do not fill the majority of American theater-goers with outright dismay, is related, if distantly, to the ability of Auschwitz's workers to be able to do their job. Tack onto WALL-E's inhumane, cold resignation to our fate a glib, nonsensical, yet so American, technology-dependent resurrection of humans—exclusively—made possible by our perfect machines, and you have the movie that got an incredible review approval rating of 97% on the review aggregator Rotten Tomatoes. Truly, we have truly made the machine-world story our own.

### Post-Human, Anti-Human

In its very first moment WALL-E attains the apogee of tragic irony when writer-director Andrew Stanton juxtaposes Jerry Herman's 1964, ever-so-hopeful, Hello Dolly lyrics with his audience's instantaneous inclusion into the movie's objectively, humanistic reality: moving impossibly swiftly through space, stars sliding around us; pausing to admire views of blue interstellar clouds. We hear: "Out there, there's a world outside of Yonkers." We look over Saturn's shoulder. Jupiter is off to one side, and the sun blazes small in the distance. A galaxy swirls across thousands of years in seconds, and then there is the Earth, North America oddly prominent, strangely brown. In a reversal of Contact's cosmic zoom, the camera rushes downward, through a haze of broken satellites and assorted space trash, into grungy clouds, ominously parting, as Michael Crawford sings: "Put on your Sunday

clothes, there's lots of world out there." A world destroyed is revealed: hills of debris, cynically immobile wind-turbines. We zoom past the dead cooling towers of long cold nuclear power plants and hear: "We're going to find adventure in the evening air. Girls in white, in a perfumed night, where the lights as bright as the stars!" And with the classic view of disinterested observation we drift directly over what we begin to see are skyscrapers of trash. We hear: "Put on your Sunday clothes we're going to ride through town in one of those new horse-drawn open cars." Finally, as "...we won't come home until we kiss the girls..." fades into echoing emptiness we hear a painfully metallic wind blowing, as we continue our emotionless drift over the ruins of our own civilization.

Then the gaily moving robot, WALL-E, appears—a distant view of "him" zipping "upwards" from the bottom of the screen. The music fades up again to half-volume, then vanishes, each time WALL-E enters and exits the screen. Cuts to extreme close-ups of "him" crushing into a cube loose heaps of cans, bottles, a child's rubber boot, brings up the volume of "Put on your Sunday clothes when you feel down and out. Strut down the street and have your picture took." Certainly the robot WALL-E is having his picture taken, and how else could we feel but down and out—seeing that all remains of our hopes and dreams and hard work is so much trash? That WALL-E might not "see" it as trash, that we could consider it building blocks made in his "post-human" male (of course) womb is but another example of what Said might call the insidious and fundamentally unjust separation between the actual lived experience of a woman's pregnancy and the unfeeling perfection of phallographic conception.

Sun setting, done for the day, WALL-E the robot is somehow tickled when his cute cockroach companion squeezes through one of his slots. A piano phrase of minor notes

begins and then descends, orchestral strings rise and ebb. The camera pulls back, and WALL-E the robot rolls down the pointless skyscraper of trash that “he” has built; the main title, WALL-E, fades into view and dissolves. Desolation hangs in the air.

### Not Then

Ninety minutes later, after this humanized love-struck robot has helped defeat the anti-human robot, and brought the human race back to Earth to begin to repopulate it, the final credits roll as we see by firelight, paintings of civilization being re-kindled. Peter Gabriel, sings Down to Earth, enlivening this “happy” future:

... Did you feel you were tricked  
By the future you picked? ...

Did you think you'd escaped from routine  
By changing the script and the scene?  
Despite all you made of it  
You're always afraid  
Of the change

You've got a lot on your chest ...  
When we messed up our homeland  
We set sail for the sky...

We're... Coming down to Earth  
Like babies at birth ...  
We're gonna find new priorities  
These are extraordinary qualities

The problem with WALL-E is that posits the time for us to “find new priorities” and come “down to Earth” as being *after* the apocalypse it presents as inevitable. Thus it effectively absolves any of us now alive from living responsibly. This is the over-looked explanation of WALL-E’s success. As with Said’s post-colonial arguments, WALL-E creates and uses a false model of dystopia—what we currently assume to be our reality—to define

its utopia. In doing so, WALL-E renders our current social construction not just of low value, but meaningless as well. As parts incapable of caring in a machine-world story, humans are trapped in an objectified worldview of meaninglessness that we can never understand, and we are confirmed in our fantasy of the exact. WALL-E's presentation of a cyclical resurrection of human civilization is mechanistic and possibly, perfectly rhythmic. WALL-E falls squarely within the late humanistic tradition of unexamined nihilism. We should continue to put our faith in perfection, WALL-E tells us, but perfection doesn't really exist in any way that pertains to us now, other than in our thoughts.

As a complex adventure/drama/satire of American excess, WALL-E is an immoral monument, a plinth of conceit, upon which we set our collective angst and the supposed sagacity of our long obsession with ourselves. In WALL-E, the American concept of love is universal and our beloved objective separation of humans from the world we so ungratefully depend on is reinforced by a story of humanity living the easy life for generations somehow, somewhere, out in space. Late in the movie, when the Captain gets out of his chair, we see more than just "him" being reborn as a human. We see that we don't need to take responsibility for our actions now. WALL-E reinforces our irrational notion that there is something about the nature of our ideas that indicates "they" can exist long after losing the non-fictional support of the living community. To embrace WALL-E as we've done, is to further cut ourselves off, especially emotionally, from the enormity of what we're sure is looming—severing whatever real obligations we now have to do whatever we can to avoid that awful future for our children. When we blankly accept this story of a trash-compactor falling in love, in a future where the vast majority of our descendants and relatives, both human and otherwise, have simply, objectively died—while a lucky few humans of mostly



European ancestry, led by men, somehow miraculously hibernate in interstellar cruise ships for generations—we only add to our greater mistake. When we fall for a machine falling in love we step deeper into our disconnected delusion of a concept-based universe, and further manifest our illogical belief in a machineworld story, perhaps hastening the unnecessary consequences of our living “in” “this” meaningless existence.

## TOWARDS GREATER AWARENESS

Eroding the Project

Bauman, in his 1989 book, Modernity and the Holocaust writes:

In the opinion of Herbert C. Kelman, a Professor Emeritus of Social Ethics at Harvard, moral inhibitions against violent atrocities tend to be eroded once three conditions are met, singly or together; the violence is *authorized* (by official orders coming from legally entitled quarters), actions are *routinized* (by rule-governed practices and exact specification of roles), and the victims of the violence are *dehumanized* (by ideological definitions and indoctrinations) (20).

“Moral inhibitions against violent atrocities” is another way of saying what Leopold was trying to accomplish with his land ethic. Yet such a project is absolutely hopeless if we persist in maintaining our presumption of a meaningless machine-world, for it is in such a social construction all three conditions for the erosion of that project are easily met. For example, Authorization: The pesticide sometimes marketed as Poncho, killed half a billion honeybees in the western Rheintal part of Germany—fifty to sixty percent of the honeybees in that region—and who knows what effect in humans—continues to receive “full EPA registration” in the United States, where it remains in wide use, despite lawsuits by the Sierra Club and it now being banned in Germany, France and Italy (Hopwood). Routinization: Government observers on fishing vessels in the Baltic Sea routinely monitor the approximate type and tonnage of “bycatch.” As for dehumanization, consider that in 1994, following an intensive radio propaganda campaign calling people of the Tutsi ethnicity “cockroaches,” Hutu militias in Rwanda murdered approximately one million Tutsis. Whatever moral inhibitions against murdering fellow humans the Hutu militias previously had was obviously eroded. To use Bauman and Kelman’s idea, the Tutsis had been

dehumanized prior to their murder. Clearly, at least semantically, only humans can be human, and thus it would be inaccurate to say we've "dehumanized" every creature on this planet but ourselves. But our behavior towards what Leopold called our fellows in this community is not unlike that of the Hutus to the Tutsis. More than half of the topsoil present when European-Americans "settled" what we call the American Midwest is now gone (McIsaac, Edwards 197) through our eradication of the subcommunities of life that made those soils possible. Our factory trawlers simply mine marine life from the world's oceans. The list goes on and on. It is true that the existence of Earth's living communities relies upon the continual ingestion of its constituents by its constituents. But from a virus to a human to an aspen grove, different levels of awareness and thus varying degrees of responsibility clearly reside within us all. Even though it would be a radical departure from the current social construction, it is tenable to imagine an existence where due care and respect is afforded any community member whose death allows for the other's life. In such a construction, care and meaning would undoubtedly be extremely salient.

This imagining, this flux of thought and the continual rebuilding of a worldview—some non-thing which we must understand is quite fragile from the perspective science has brought us of our small place within this universe—is all part of a process which that Icelandic engineer might recognize: education. By this I mean a broad variety of education that encourages understanding, belonging, meaning, and doesn't deny hope. It may take several generations, or many, many more. But I wouldn't deny my children, nor anyone else's children, the hope that their work might lead there. When I tell a story with an awareness of—and yet not limited to—the unjust past we humans share with all life on this planet, it will change how humans relate to that community. When an engineer, politician,

teacher or artist looks out her or his window a century from now and sees a part of her or his very being, and not a just an object in the form of tree; when she or he doesn't fall into what Evernden calls the "trap of mistaking the skin encapsulated object for the process of relationships" (13), then the authorization and routinization of the violent atrocities that are currently destroying the community we are a part of will begin to subside, just as "its" dehumanization, or rather devaluation, will have faded as we loose our ability to think in those old ways.

### Power and Humility

As someone who might be called a science filmmaker I see myself as standing, like Lynkeus, Goethe's keen-eyed tower watchman in Faust, in the tower, separated by my lenses and computer from reality in any direct sense. In the first few lines in Act V of Part Two, Lynkeus sings:

<u>Zum Sehen geboren</u>	To see I was born
<u>Zum Schauen bestellt</u>	To look is my call
<u>Dem Turme geschworen</u>	to the tower sworn
<u>Gefällt mir die Welt</u>	I delight in all
<u>Ich blick' in die Ferne</u>	I glance out far
<u>Ich seh' in der Näh'</u>	and see what is near
<u>Den Mond und die Sterne</u>	the moon and stars
<u>Den Wald und das Reh</u> (Guest 151, 152)	the wood and the deer (Kaufman, 75)

Even though my work is natively the action of the voyeur as it objectifies my subjects, I believe that if I bring to it an awareness of those risks, it will more significantly be a responsible and necessary expression of the alterable nature of the social construction.

Similarly science, my subject, which Mary Klages writes is our "idea that observation and deduction are sufficient means for understanding how the world works and how things

happen, without reference to any kind of divine or extra-human power”(11), can be thought of as Faust, always striving, never satisfied, taunted by the Mephistopheles of his fervent human obsession with invariable being. After all, science, even with all its ancillary structure, even after we deflate its permanent imperial being that humanism has provided it, is just our quest to understand. Mephistopheles is our delusions of grandeur. Obviously we humans are both Faust and Mephistopheles at the same time. There is no perfect boundary between mortal humans, and the invariable being of our concepts. And it is undeniable that both rely on far more than either for their continued existence. In the end, of course, I agree with Goethe, whose angels arrive at the closing of Act V to save Faust, and who declare: “He who strives on and lives to strive [sorely tested], can earn redemption still.”

Victor Frankl writes:

What is demanded of man is not, as some existential philosophers teach, to endure the meaninglessness of life, but rather to bear his incapacity to grasp its unconditional meaningfulness in rational terms (141).

After all, man is that being who invented the gas chambers of Auschwitz; however, he is also that being who entered those gas chambers upright, with the Lord’s Prayer or the *Shema Yisreal* on his lips (157).

Truly, the power of our ideas is the greatest thing we humans can produce. Yet science has finally given us a perspective of how that power can never in any ultimate way exceed the value of our Earth-bound existence. We are small players in the greater story of nature, but if we live prudently and responsibly—which is completely in our power to do—there is certainly no end in sight for our species and perhaps only major modifications in store for our current global civilization. What’s completely clear is that as a filmmaking member of a living community my task is to not contribute any more validity to the misconception that we humans and our ideas can somehow exist independently of

everything else—views that have undoubtedly led us into despair and the personal nihilism of the existential vacuum. As a filmmaker I'd like to re-tell and finally make good "The Land Ethic"—to promote caring for the community of life, which is so much better in so many ways than simply us alone. I'd like for my stories to be about being human, and about our obligation to care for ourselves so that we may care for others. In that there is always hope.

In conclusion, it is how we relate to our current existence that is important. While the power of our ideas is truly humankind's greatest creation, that power comes to naught outside of time and our Earth-bound existence. What we must learn to value in America is not simply the power of ideas, but the responsibilities inherent in every moment of our existence. As Victor Frankl writes: "Freedom is but the negative aspect of the whole phenomenon whose positive aspect is responsibility" (156). What is important to notice is that without time we could not make sense of Frankl's idea. Time and the fact that our existence is but part of a whole are second and third legs of our social construction. Without them, our ideas fall. Now and all are important.

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