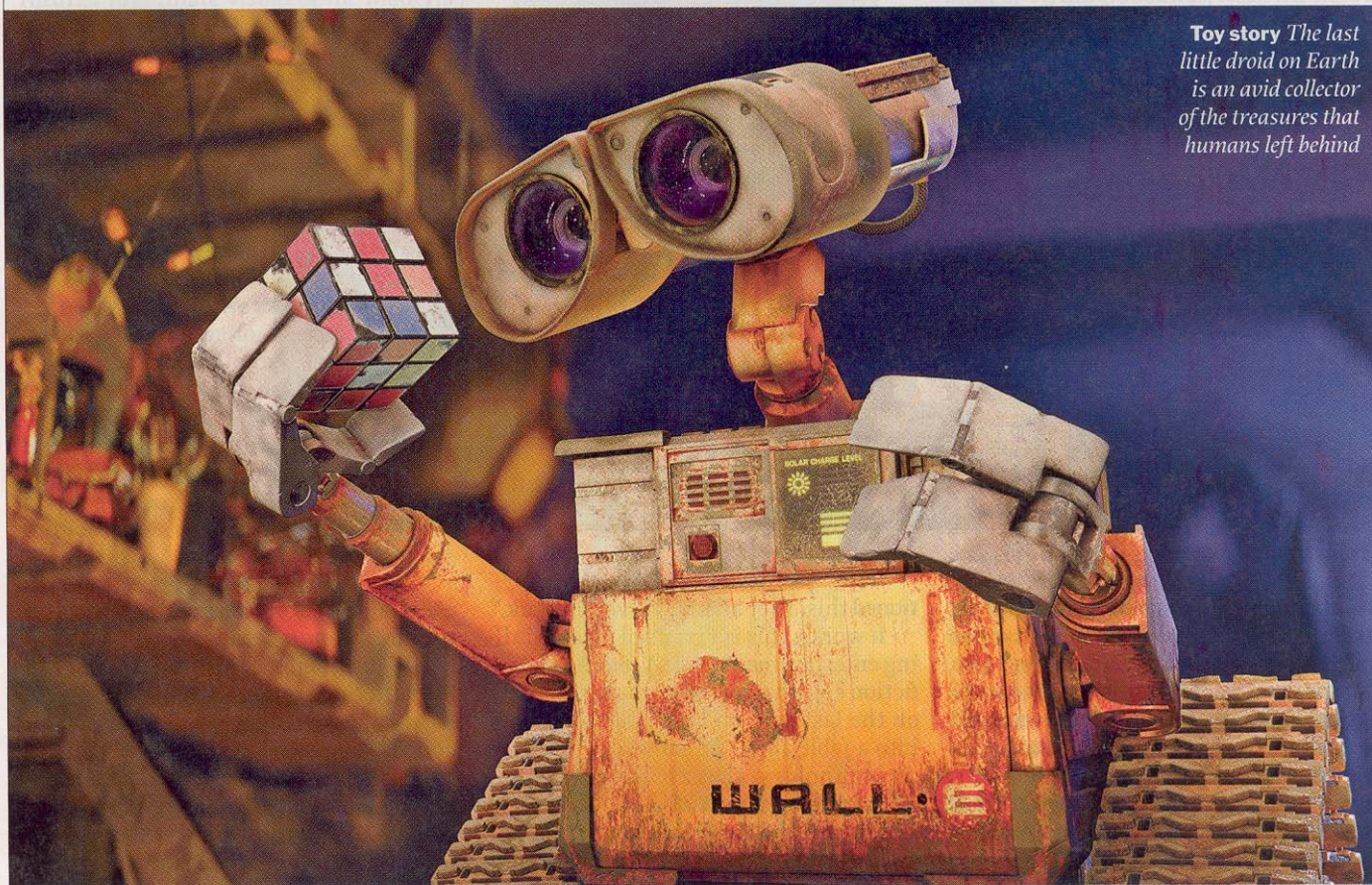


Centuries before globalization became a buzzword, it took on a Portuguese accent

RON GLUCKMAN ON LISBON'S ORIENTAL MUSEUM

# Arts

MOVIES MUSIC BOOKS EXHIBITIONS FASHION ARCHITECTURE



**Toy story** The last little droid on Earth is an avid collector of the treasures that humans left behind

## MOVIES

**Pixar's Biggest Gamble.** The animation wonder boys roll the dice on a demanding (and delightful) sci-fi robot romance

BY RICHARD CORLISS

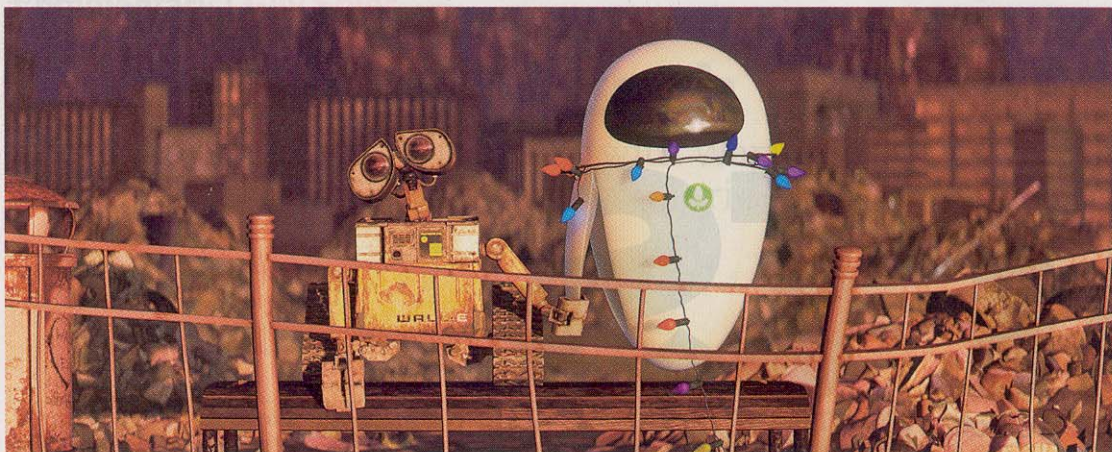
THE DUSTY CITYSCAPE SHOWS REMNANTS of a civilization: an empty bank, a cratered warehouse mall, tattered billboards for colas and travel agencies, all bearing the logo of Buy-N-Large. TOO MUCH TRASH—EARTH COVERED reads an old headline, and we note that some of the skyscrapers are made of compacted trash cubes. The planet has become one huge junkyard, as

if all humanity were a rock band that had made a shambles of a hotel room, then just strolled out. The only remaining sign of organic life on Earth is that unkillable little bugger, a cockroach.

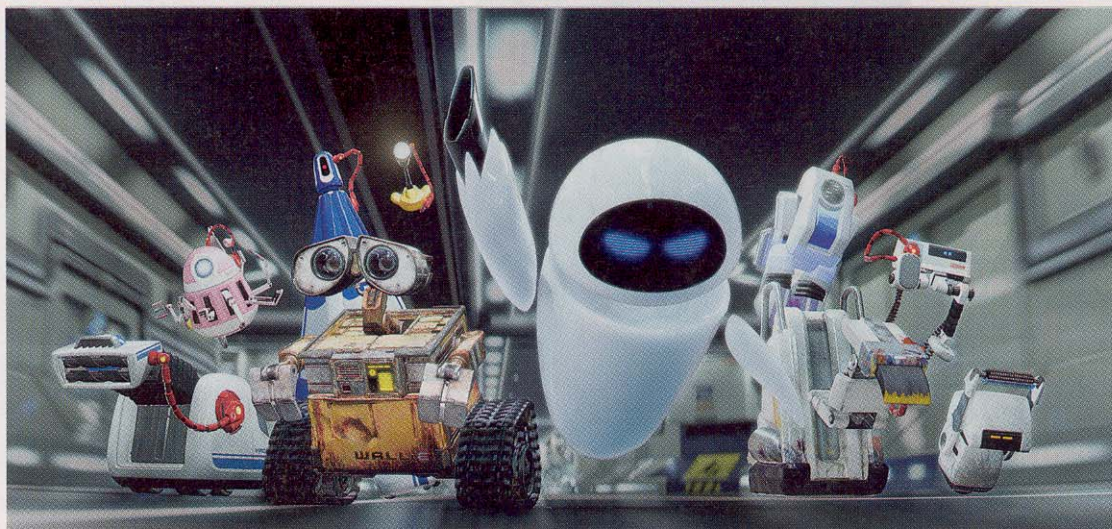
Among this urban detritus, something else is moving. It looks like another trash cube—but with binocular eyes, forklift plates for arms and Caterpillar tracks to navigate the rough terrain. The thing is called a Waste Allocation Load Lifter,

Earth-Class—WALL-E—and its job is to clean up the mess of consumerism run amok. It's also apparently the last of its kind still functioning.

Apparently, because for its first 30 min., the new Pixar astonishment WALL-E has virtually no dialogue. Nor does it offer a *Star Wars*-like print crawl to inform viewers that this is Earth 800 years from now. The mechanical critter who is the film's hero can speak only in electronic



**The odd couple** Even though she's a little stiff and cold, not to mention several generations more advanced, WALL•E pursues EVE to the edge of the universe



**The gang's all here** WALL•E, EVE and an assorted band of so-called malfunctioning robots wreak havoc aboard the spaceship Axiom

grunts and sighs, or in one-word bursts, like a chattier R2-D2. The movie's other main creature, a robot named EVE, also can speak only a few words. Yet it's Pixar's big, bold belief that the mass audience will be astute enough to follow the visual clues and game enough to play along. So confident is the studio in its ability to charm audiences, it has made a futurist movie that's a lot like an old silent picture.

When writer-director Andrew Stanton—whose last film was Pixar's all-time box-office champ, *Finding Nemo*—showed the first reels of *WALL•E* to the studio's brain trust three years ago, fellow auteur Brad Bird (*The Incredibles*) told him, "Man, you didn't make it easy for yourself." A movie that shows but doesn't tell, and whose leading characters are essentially mimes, could put an end to the eight-film box-office winning streak that began with *Toy Story* in 1995 and continued unbroken through last year's *Ratatouille*. To sell the project, Stanton had only his faith in the idea, and the collaboration of sound-design guru Ben Burtt, who would create WALL•E's "voice" and most of the film's other noises. But as Stanton recalls, "No one ques-

tioned this. They all knew it would work."

It works; this is Pixar's most enthralling entertainment since *Nemo*. A science-fiction epic that starts off as a smart twist on the last-man-on-Earth plot and veers into a fable about humans' overreliance on technology, the movie should connect with audiences of all ages because it stars the most adorable little trash-bot ever. He's less a trash collector than a trash connoisseur, adding new items to the treasures he keeps on shelves in the shack he has built for himself. Hmmm, what about this green thing, a plant sprout, that he found in his foraging? That goes into an old shoe.

Yet, as we spot the fret lines above his

**A movie that shows but doesn't tell could put an end to the box-office winning streak that began in 1995 and continued unbroken through last year**

eyes and see the carcasses of other robots on the junk heaps, we realize that WALL•E is a lonely guy. There's an instant poignancy to his pattering around the late, great planet Earth like a solitary child on an abandoned playground, or an oldster among his souvenirs. WALL•E's special ache is his nostalgia for a life he never lived, for the intimate connection only humans enjoy. On his home VCR (a Betamax!), he plays and replays two numbers from the 1969 movie musical *Hello, Dolly!*: the brassy *Put on Your Sunday Clothes* and the ballad *It Only Takes a Moment*, which moves him with a closeup of a boy's hand holding a girl's.

It's only fitting that the last robot on Earth, like the first man, should find his EVE (for Extra-terrestrial Vegetation Evaluator). She has been sent as a probe from the gigantic spaceship on which all humans were evacuated 700 years before, and where their descendants live in pampered placidity. EVE is as advanced—smooth, sleek, white, egg-shaped, with glowing blue eyes—as WALL•E is clunky. When he sits next to her on a bench at sunset (he must also have seen Woody Allen's *Manhattan*) and tries to hold her sort-of hand, EVE rejects him. It's

nothing personal; it's just that she has been programmed to find plant life on Earth. And in a shoe at home, lucky WALL•E has what she's looking for. Ta-da!

The plant gets the two of them a trip to the *Axiom*, a kind of permanent cruise ship on which an army of droids tends to the exiled humans' every need—every need but exercise, for either body or mind. "Because the ship is totally automated," Stanton says, "the inhabitants have lost their need to know anything." The *Axiom* is Stanton's futurist nightmare vision of the modern home computer that is our work, shop and play station. After centuries of digital reliance, he says, "We'd turn into big babies that haven't grown up, that have lost the need to mature physically and socially." The movie's plot pirouettes on the ability of the humans to show as much grit and heart as WALL•E has back on his trash planet.

### Brilliant Boys and Their Cool Toys

IF THERE'S ANY ANXIETY AT PIXAR ABOUT doing an *I Am Legend* for the junior set, you won't hear it from John Lasseter, Pixar's creative director and the inventive mind behind *Toy Story*, *A Bug's Life* and *Cars*. He's his usual beaming, cartoon-round, Hawaiian-shirt-wearing self as he waxes rhapsodic about WALL•E and, in passing, confides the secret of the studio's success: "The people who work here are doing what they've wanted to do their whole lives."

That would sound like cult-leader talk from anyone else. But a visitor to Pixar HQ in Emeryville, Calif. (where the upscale cafeteria serves iced tea, not Kool-Aid), finds a workforce that is able to channel a child's sense of play and wild imagination into the business of CGI moviemaking. The trick: never grow up. Lasseter's office shelves groan with hundreds of gewgaws from Pixar films. "I love toys," he says unabashedly. "A lot of animators love toys."

Toy love—the child's belief that a piece of cloth or a machine can have life, feelings, personality—is at the heart of many Pixar movies, beginning with Lasseter's '80s shorts *Luxo, Jr.* (whose lamp became the *i* in the company's logo), *Red's Dream* and *Tin Toy*, all made to demonstrate the possibilities of the infant CGI medium but with the savvy and sentiment of a natural storyteller. Stanton says he has seen *Luxo, Jr.* dozens of times, yet, "Miraculously, I get caught up every time" in the wordless story of father-and-son lamps. Take that 2-min. experiment from 1986, and WALL•E is the logical romantic extension: toy meets girl.

And, on a technical level, sight meets sound. WALL•E's animation, especially

## The Wizard of Ears. Sound designer Ben Burt is the genius of aural effects



**Noisemaker** He records or creates sounds, then bends them to his own use

### CHEWBACCA

The expressive growls and mewls of the Star Wars Wookiee co-pilot are a mélange of animal noises: dog, lion and walrus



### DARTH VADER

The voice is James Earl Jones', but the wheeze is Burt's: he recorded his breathing through a Dacor scuba regulator

### E.T. THE EXTRA-TERRESTRIAL

Burt won an Oscar for giving the alien a voice. (Actually, it is his wife's voice. She had a cold that day)



in scenes on Earth, has a photorealistic quality; it looks like a gorgeously arid, live-action waste dump. The appointments of the *Axiom*, exterior and interior, are as finely detailed as those in any *Star Wars* or *Alien* film. Even if the exploits of WALL•E and EVE don't take and break your heart, you'll be impressed by the graphic design.

Add to that the amazing dimension Burt brought to the film. Signing with Pixar after 28 years at Lucasfilm Ltd., he got this plum of a project: he'd be creating most of WALL•E's sounds, from the hero's voice (Burt's own, which he stretched, distorted and metallicized on his computer keyboard) to the wind of WALL•E's world ("That's just Niagara Falls") and the sound of the bot driving around ("It's taken from a tank, but it's made to sound tiny").

Burt is an audio Audubon. Much of his recording is done "on location"—in zoos, his driveway or (lots of this in WALL•E) a junkyard. The chirps needed for WALL•E's cockroach companion were provided by "a raccoon, speeded up," and the insect's clicks came from the sound of locking handcuffs. "I was recording a policeman's Taser," Burt recalls, "and I said, 'Let me hear your handcuffs.'"

Having spent so much time with George Lucas on the *Star Wars* series, Burt is used to demanding directors. But even he was sometimes perplexed by Stanton's requests. "Andrew would say, 'That sound of the motor—could we have one with more pathos?' I wonder about that for a minute. And then I see it as just another challenge and say, 'O.K., I'll get ya one!'"

Pixar, at its best, invents its own challenges. The typical director worries that most people will see his movie at home, their fingers on the fast-forward and stop buttons, so he makes every element instantly understandable. That's why most movies seem as if they were made for the passengers of the *Axiom*. But WALL•E plays without safety nets or spoon-feeding; it reinvents the delicate, potent behavioral language of silent-film comedy, of the Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin films.

"We don't want to contribute to the dreck," Stanton says of the Pixar team. "We want to sustain the love of going to movies. After *Finding Nemo*, I thought, Now is the time to push open the door—to broaden the palette, increase the possibility of what a good movie is in the audience's mind." Will they have to open their receptors? Fine. "If they discover it on their own, they'll enjoy it so much more."

Pixar has taken its biggest gamble, but it's moviegoers who'll be the winners. ■