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HNR 304: Autocracy vs. Democracy

15 December 2022

Everything Is Autocratic: The Hidden Dystopia of *The Lego Movie*

In 1973, a Danish 12 year old named Lars C. Hassing had three things on his mind: the Apollo program, Lego, and filmmaking. From these interests came 'En rejse til månen', or "Journey to the Moon", a six-minute stop motion film portraying a Lego-based moon mission. While fairly simplistic, the film is thoroughly impressive work considering the creator's age, and was recognized by the CEO of Lego, who rewarded him with a tour of the factory and a few Lego sets (Hassing). This has since been credited as the very first stop motion Lego film, or 'brickfilm', a genre which later gained traction on the internet. 41 years after Hassing's film, a feature length Lego movie was released, aptly titled, *The Lego Movie*. While not technically stop motion, its animation style draws heavily from the medium of brickfilms, to the point where many were unaware that it was computer-generated upon release. The film received positive reviews from both audiences and critics, and has since spawned a sequel and two spin-offs. Kids enjoyed a light-hearted romp through a Lego world, while adults were faced with the story of rebels overcoming an autocratic regime- two contrasting tones that manage to mesh quite nicely. Upon analysis, the world of *The Lego Movie* reveals itself to be much darker than the plastic bricks let on, portraying a fascist dystopia ruling over a subservient populace.

The setting of *The Lego Movie* is a world where a dictator has acquired complete dominance, and is not only accepted but beloved by his subjects. This dictator is Lord Business, also known to his subjects as President Business. He is the president of Octan, a

megacorporation so vast that it has total political and economic control of the world: “Octan, they make good stuff. Music, dairy products, coffee, TV shows, surveillance systems, all history books, voting machines” (*Lego* 11:50-56). Mass surveillance is explicitly shown within the film, but the ownership of ‘history books’ and ‘voting machines’ suggests that Octan uses the education system to spread a pro-Octan narrative, and that perhaps the citizens are even made to believe that they live in a democracy when in fact the vote is always rigged. In any case, the vast majority of the populace is unquestioning and even favorable towards Octan, viewing them as a benevolent force within the world. This is most readily seen in Bricksburg, a sprawling urban metropolis in Lego form. The city is a veritable authoritarian utopia, with Octan propaganda plastered on every surface (e.g. see Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Still from Lord & Miller, *The Lego Movie* (5:40).

The movie opens by taking us along a typical day in the life of Emmet, a very average person who serves as the film’s protagonist. His morning routine is dictated by a set of instructions, also produced by Octan, which dictate how he should behave and interact with the world around him. It is implied that every citizen of Bricksburg follows a similar set of instructions, based on the almost total lack of individuality between each person. The only

unique qualities shown in each individual are ultimately inconsequential personality traits, such as liking sausages, or being ‘perky’, or making people laugh (*Lego* 12:40-12:55). Otherwise, everyone is incredibly similar, and thus easier to control. Timothy Snyder proposes that one of the ways to avoid tyranny is to “stand out”: “It is easy to follow along. It can feel strange to do or say something different. But without that unease, there is no freedom” (Snyder 29). The residents of Bricksburg completely fail at standing out, and are conditioned by the culture around them to conform. Even though they willingly participate in this society, they lack the freedom to do anything else, perhaps without even realizing it. This is proven in the climax of the film, where one of Emmet’s companions, Wyldstyle, makes a petition to the masses to be unique and creative instead of falling in with what society expects of them (*Lego* 1:14:50-16:02). Her speech is well received, as the citizens of Bricksburg are then shown to be building things out of the environment around them, and using their constructions to rebel against Lord Business’ forces. The moment they are encouraged to take Snyder’s advice and stand out, they discover their freedom, and find that it’s worth fighting for.

Over the course of the film, we follow Emmet as he interacts with the Master Builders, a loosely organized coalition that acts as a foil to Lord Business, embracing individuality and opposing Octan. As the name suggests, they are skilled at constructing things out of the Lego bricks which make up their environment, an act which Lord Business finds disruptive. The dictator’s aim is to create what he considers to be a perfect world, with everything in its ‘rightful place’. The process by which he came to power is not explained in the film, but it does explore the actions he took once assuming control of the world. According to Wyldstyle, “all the people of the universe were once free to travel and mingle and build whatever they wanted. But President Business was confused by all the chaos, so he erected walls between the worlds and

became obsessed with order and perfection” (*Lego* 21:07-22). She then describes how he utilized his police force to detain as many Master Builders as he could, leaving only a remnant of the group in hiding. In a move straight out of the dictator’s playbook, he segregates the public into isolated groups, then takes action against a minority which he considers a threat to the status quo. At the time of the film, it is unclear how much time has passed since he came to power, but the general population, including Emmet, appears to be completely unaware of the existence of the other worlds or the Master Builders. Society has reconfigured itself around Lord Business’ artificial barriers, and the only remaining opposition is the scattered group of Master Builders in hiding. And yet, even this amount of resistance seems to be too much for Lord Business, so he plots to permanently end all interference with his plans.

The inciting incident of the film’s story is when he intends to permanently thwart the Master Builders with a superweapon called the ‘Kragle’, an erroneous name for a tube of Krazy Glue. His plan is to use it on the world and all of its inhabitants, gluing them in place and thus completely removing any form of autonomy. This could be viewed as an allegory for genocide: Lord Business attempts to systematically remove a group of innocent civilians just because they do not fit into his ideal world. The film does well to avoid this connection, given its target audience of children- being ‘Kragled’ does not actually kill the victim, but makes them unable to move or interact in any form, a fate nearly as severe. This cements Lord Business’ status as a dictator, and acts as the motivation for Emmet and the Master Builders to work together and stop him.

The themes of autocracy are deeply embedded throughout the movie, but they are consistently and clearly portrayed as a force of evil. All characters in the movie can be placed in one of three factions: Lord Business and his forces, the Master Builders, and the civilian

populace. The first is the world's dictator and his adherents, which include his police forces and the employees of Octan. Lord Business' right-hand man is Bad Cop, a police officer whose brutal tactics make him ruthlessly efficient at capturing Master Builders. At the beginning of the film, he is also shown to have a good side, appropriately named 'Good Cop', but this side of him is removed by Lord Business after suspecting it is making him 'soft'. Apart from these two, Octan and the rest of the police are completely staffed by robots. This is an example of othering: apart from Bad Cop, the only ones who actively participate in Lord Business' regime are literally portrayed as inhuman. However, this is not used as a political tactic for either side, it is instead intended for the audience: removing all humanity from the opposition removes any potential moral ambiguity from fighting and destroying them. Lord Business and Bad Cop are both redeemed at the end of the movie, and the robots follow suit, likely because they are programmed to be completely subservient to Lord Business. In that sense, they too are victims of the regime, as they lack the agency to choose whether or not they want to support Octan. Or perhaps as robots, they may not have the same level of sapience as humans, but that topic is not explored in the film.

In opposition to Lord Business' autocracy are the Master Builders, a force of chaos and creativity against Octan's order and rigidity. At the beginning of the film, their lack of organization works against them, as they are persistently unable to work together well enough to pose a threat to Octan. At that point the group was more or less anarchical, with no single person having more authority than any other. This is most evident during a scene where a group of Master Builders has to work together to build a submarine and escape Bad Cop. They are able to successfully construct the submarine, but it ends up being a chaotic mesh of conflicting styles (e.g. see Fig 2), and quickly collapses under the pressure of the ocean.



Fig. 2. Still from Lord & Miller, *The Lego Movie* (49:21).

The Master Builders only begin to succeed once they decide to join under the leadership of Emmet, and work together as a cohesive unit. By following a plan, they are able to infiltrate Octan headquarters and come very close to disarming the Kragle. Their success is directly attributable to accepting Emmet as their leader, but unlike Lord Business, his authority is freely given by his subordinates. Emmet is unquestionably the least talented builder of the group, and has no intrinsic right to rule apart from him being chosen by the others to act as their leader. This can be seen as a rudimentary form of democracy, especially considering that Emmet would have no way to stop any member of the group from leaving or taking over if they desired.

The last notable group of people in the film are the civilians of the world. They are oblivious to the conflict between Octan and the Master Builders, and perhaps are even unaware that they live in an autocracy. Most individuals hold a favorable view of Octan and Lord Business, but this is explicitly shown to be on account of naivety instead of support for his actions or ideology. Once his Kragle plot is revealed, public perception immediately shifts to abject terror, and after Wyldstyle's speech, outright rebellion. Nobody is shown to be

sympathetic to Octan after the Kragle is unleashed, though they are also never given the opportunity to surrender in exchange for being spared. In any case, the civilians are clearly portrayed as victims, even while they are participating within an autocratic society. Within the context of the film they are considered innocent and neutral, and eventually even on the side of good. The black-and-white portrayal of autocracy as evil and democracy and teamwork as good is to be expected from a film made for children audiences, which may not focus on political motivations as part of its core themes.

Despite the amount of autocratic subtext in the film, it seems to be used more as an aesthetic choice than an anti-authoritarian message. The story of *The Lego Movie* falls within the broad genre of dystopian fiction, with the story consisting of a protagonist overcoming the dystopian society they live in. Dystopian fiction has historically been closely associated with themes of authoritarianism, a connection most famously seen in George Orwell's seminal novel, *1984*. Works like *1984*, Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, and more recently the *Hunger Games* trilogy by Suzanne Collins all discuss the lives of characters living within autocratic regimes, and are among countless other books and films with similar themes (Liptak). The genre tends to be laden with political commentary, warning audiences of the dangers of an authoritarian society. In many ways *The Lego Movie* fits nicely into this category, but it is unique in that the film is very much intended for young audiences as well. Portraying a dark, gritty dystopia would go directly against this goal, and as such the film is instead structured and marketed as an adventure film. It proves its status as an outlier by redeeming the villains at the end, a move not uncommon for childrens' media, but virtually unheard of in dystopian fiction. The film's core message promotes the positive values of creativity, individualism, and teamwork for its viewers, and I personally believe that this is the extent of the film's message. I find the autocratic themes to

instead be a byproduct of the dystopian genre as a whole, along with the concepts of good and evil within popular media. In that sense, perhaps the portrayal of autocracy as evil is a theme so ingrained in American culture that presenting an autocratic dictator is just shorthand for that character being a villain. *The Lego Movie* doesn't exist in a vacuum- its content is a product of the culture in which it was developed in, and a conclusive answer as to whether or not the anti-authoritarian themes were intended as a focal point of the film could only be answered by its creators.

In the aftermath of World War II, Europe was faced with rebuilding its society and safeguarding itself from the threat of autocracy spreading once again. The European Union was formed from the dust, intended to be a bastion of democracy for the continent. The first new members, Denmark, Ireland, and the United Kingdom, joined in 1973: the same year that a young Dane finished a short film featuring his favorite toys ("History of the EU"). Lars C. Hassing is not a public figure, his greatest claim to fame being that childhood project. It is doubtful that he could have conceived the legacy his film would have, let alone the medium it would spark. *The Lego Movie* could be considered the crown jewel of that legacy: a feature length film based on the medium he helped develop. And yet, the film may have just as much to attribute to the likes of Orwell and Bradbury, or to the horrors of our own history. *The Lego Movie* is much like its toy counterpart in that it can be many things: to some a comedic adventure, or a lesson in creativity, while to others a dystopian nightmare, or a cautionary tale.

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