

Everything is Authors: Personality, Originality, and Intent in *The Lego Movie*

In his 1952 essay “Archetype and Signature: A Study of the Relationship Between Biography and Poetry,” literary critic Leslie Fiedler tell us, “there has been at work all along in our period an underground, and probably harmful, analogy between poetry and the plastic arts” (255). Of course, the “plastic arts” to which Fielder refers are different than the plastic arts honed by the characters in *The Lego Movie*; in fact, Fielder, who argues that study of poetry and of poets should be mutually beneficial, would probably support the dominant artistic mentality possessed by the animated minifigures of *The Lego Movie*. Not only do the characters in *The Lego Movie* express their personality through their Lego creations, they are also obsessed with judging and criticizing each other based on the ingenuity and elegance of those creations. That is, except for the main character, Emmet (Chris Pratt), who appears to be a blank slate, incapable of original thought. Yet Emmet, with his empty mind, is the only character able to give hope to a resistance of minifigures seeking to prevent Lord Business (Will Farrell) from super-gluing the entire world in place. Another reversal of expectations occurs in the film’s final act, when it is revealed that what we have seen so far was not authored by director-screenwriters Phil Lord and Christopher Miller;¹ rather, the first hour-and-seventeen-minutes of *The Lego Movie* is written by a kid who is playing with his father’s Legos without his father’s permission. It becomes unclear how much control the minifigures have in their own story. *The Lego Movie* plays with authorship in a variety of ways, depicting both how authorship relates to personality as well as showing how a changing of authors can alter, and even negate, the meaning of a text.

¹ *The Lego Movie* actually has nine total screenwriting credits, according to IMDB. Of course, once you including the actors, producers, sound mixers, and caterers, determining the author of *The Lego Movie* becomes an incalculable endeavor. And that’s before addressing the fact that Phil Lord and Christopher Miller [share a Wikipedia page](#) and very well could be one person.

Combatting the Generic

“The dissident who lets his beard grow in an age of the clean-shaven, or is crowned by a top hat is a neighborhood of homburgs, is a wonder and an impossibility and a scandal for those who see him.” – Jorge Luis Borges, “Our Instabilities,” 1931

The plot of *The Lego Movie* is simple. The plot, in which “a pretty girl and an average man battle against an all-powerful, malicious society,” is so simple, in fact, that Borges makes fun of how generic it is—while reviewing the film *Nightmare* in 1943 (“Two Films” 261). *The Lego Movie* begins with a prologue in which the wizard Vitruvius (Morgan Freeman) is blinded by Lord Business, who is there to steal the “Kragle” (a malapropism of “Krazy Glue”).² Newly-blind, Vitruvius now has the archetypal credibility to deliver a prophecy, telling of how a “Special” will find “The Piece of Resistance” to stop Lord Business and the Kragle. The film’s first act begins by introducing us to Emmet, a construction worker, and what appears to be the status-quo in his home city of Bricksburg. Minifigures go about their days in gleeful synchronization. Cultural artifacts of Bricksburg are solely produced by the Octan Corporation,³ owned by Lord Business (who goes by President Business in public broadcasts). We’re introduced to precisely one song (“Everything is Awesome”) and one television show (“Where Are My Pants?”) both of which appear to be the only cultural artifacts in their respective mediums.⁴ The first act ends after a regular workday of, as Emmet’s boss says, “[taking] everything weird and [blowing] it up” when Emmet stumbles upon: 1) the Piece of Resistance

² That characters’ struggle with reading English is evidence that their primary form of written communication is through Lego bricks.

³ [The Octan Corporation](#) is a fictional oil corporation created by LEGO® that has been around since 1992.

⁴ The singularity of cultural products is especially confusing when Emmet passes by a train whose passengers cheer, “Gooooooooo, Sports Team!” as though it were possible for sports to exist with only one team.

and 2) Wyldstyle, a “Master Builder” with whom Emmet instantly becomes infatuated. The first act of *The Lego Movie* introduces us to the consumerist and culturally homogenous community of Bricksburg, a community that lacks creativity and is set on following instructions. The second act shifts focus to Bricksburg’s foil: the rebellious Master Builders.

The second act of the film is filled with exposition and world-building, mostly delivered by Wyldstyle and Vitruvius as they introduce Emmet to the community of Master Builders, characters that freely manipulate the bricks that make up their world. As Lord Business’s servants chase down Emmet and Wyldstyle, action sequences revolve around Master Builders transforming their soundings into useful vehicles for escape. Wyldstyle, for example, deconstructs an alleyway and builds a motorcycle, which she later revises to make a hovercraft. Throughout the various chase sequences, we learn that Bricksburg is only one of many realms in the universe, each of which appears to correspond to a real-world collection of Lego® sets: The Old West, Pirates’ Cove, Middle Zealand, The Bionicles®, etc.⁵ It is around the halfway point of the film that the focus shifts from progressing the plot to exploring the personalities of its characters. In fact, this shift can be pinpointed precisely—it happens when we meet Batman (Will Arnett).

Caricature and Character

“I propose to prove that personality is a mirage maintained by conceit and custom, without metaphysical foundation or visceral reality.” – Jorge Luis Borges, “The Nothingness of Personality,” 1922

⁵ That the realms correspond to real-world Lego sets is probably known by most viewers, but it’s probably not known by Wyldstyle or any of the other Master Builders. However, the text itself seems to be aware of this fact, given the cavalier tone Wyldstyle takes when rattling off various realms before saying that there are “a bunch of others we don’t need to mention” as a series of much-less-famous Lego sets quickly flash across the screen, making a joke of the dissonance between a text, its characters, its authors, and its audience.

The inhabitants of Bricksburg, despite their uniform culture, are each singularly distinguishable. While some wholly embody some comedic trope—the cat lady, the surfer bro, the hipster barista—others are defined by a singular interest. For example, construction workers are differentiated by their preferred sports-bar food: chicken wings, croissants, or sausages. While the Master Builders often have quirkier or more abstract traits, their personalities are still defined by a singular element. For example, Batman embodies darkness. He only works in black bricks (okay, sometimes “*very dark grey*”) and produces spoken-word metal music about being an orphan.⁶ The Unikity (a kitten with a single horn) embodies repression. The “1980’s-something Space Man” just really, really wants to build a spaceship, and attempts to reframe every conflict he is a part of into another opportunity to build his spaceship. Even the film’s central characters are defined (often explicitly) by some single characteristic. Namely, Wyldstyle is defined by her insecurity about being special (Vitruvius doesn’t recognize her at first, since she keeps changing her name in pursuit of this desire) and Lord Business is defined by his opposition to change (he leads an authoritarian regime set on fixing every Lego brick in place via super-glue and walks on stilts that fix his path of motion as linear). Although these characters are central to the film, and their traits relate directly to the film’s major themes (making them more important than other characters’ themes), the personalities of Wyldstyle and Lord Business are no less singular in nature. That personality can be reduced to a singular element seems ubiquitous. But there is one exception to this rule: Emmet, who has no defining characteristic.

Emmet’s extreme generic-ness is gag throughout the film. When Emmet first learns he is generic, it disappoints him. While he is being interrogated by Lord Business’s main henchman,

⁶ Batman’s girlfriend, Wyldstyle, remarks, “This is real music, Emmet. Batman is a true artist: dark, brooding...” While it is not unusual for characters to see artistic ability as a sign of (romantic) fitness, characters normally comment on each other’s abilities as Master Builders—how creatively they can manipulate Lego bricks—not on their artistic ability in other mediums.

we hear a testimony from one of Emmet's coworkers: "Yeah, he's kind of an average, normal kind of guy...but you know he's not like normal like us, no...look at Randy, here. He likes sausage. That's something. Gale is perky. That's something...we all have something that makes us something, and Emmet is nothing." The reasoning appears to be that to be normal there needs to be something about you that is recognizable. Existing without an identifiable characteristic is uncanny. While Emmet is disappointed to learn of how others perceive him (he's not naturally reflective of self-critiquing), his apparent lack of personality doubles as a strength. For example, one of President Business's underlings remarks that Emmet's face is so generic that it matches every face in their database, thus making him untraceable. Later, when Vitruvius and Wyldstyle enter Emmet's mind, they start joking about how empty it is. It's only when a giant hand (a human hand rendered with translucent Lego bricks) manifests that they realize that Emmet's empty mind is an asset—it gives him unparalleled levels of openness which, it turns out, is pretty useful for fostering creativity. In *The Art Instinct*, Denis Dutton tells us that "The philosophy of art as an academic discipline has long thrived on paradoxes and the insights that come from taking them to pieces" (166). Emmet is a paradox—his defining trait being that he has no defining trait. It is fitting that his first genuine "original" idea in the film is to literally take himself to pieces, removing his hair, so that he can use his head as a replacement axle in a car chase. It is because of his lack of personality that Emmet is so flexible.

What follows is a weaker statement than one we've already made, but it's nonetheless helpful to state. In *The Lego Movie*, personality exists. Every (Lego) character is identifiable by a single characteristic; this is not true for humans. But understanding the personality of the Master Builders is the first step towards understanding the Master Builders as authors.

The Minifigure Poets / A Language of Bricks

“The art of combination is not infinite in its possibilities, though those possibilities are apt to be frightening.” – Jorge Luis Borges, “On Dubbing,” 1945

“The definition I shall give of the word is—like others—verbal, that is to say, also made of words, that is to say, wordy.” – Jorge Luis Borges, “An Investigation of the Word,” 1927

It is here that we make the explicit identification between the Master Builders and poets.⁷ Their language is one of bricks, and their dominant critical mentality echoes the Romantics, for whom poetry is seen as the expression of the poet. This is first apparent when Wyldstyle rescues Emmet from his interrogation. Emmet falls, clunkily, into a waste basket, which Wyldstyle mistakes for artistic insight and remarks, “Oh, sir, you’re brilliant. We’ll build a motorcycle out of the alleyway.” She instantly gives Emmet respect based off his perceived skill as a Master Builder. And while Master Builders often build out of necessity (vehicles, buildings, disguises, etc.), they also imbue their personality into whatever they make. Vitruvius, who is obsessed with the irregular, collects rare Lego bricks and has tiled his walls and ceiling such that he is able to walk horizontally and upside down. His home is a pure expression of his personality. But although the Master Builders are successful as individual artists, they fail at collaboration. When Vitruvius, Wyldstyle, Batman, the Unikity, and the 1980’s-something Space Man jointly build a submarine, it breaks apart at the seams, the implication being that each character was too rigid in their artistic style. Lord Business is aware of this problem, but his attempt to foster artistic collaboration—by creating a “think tank” comprised of a towering grid of captured Master Builders—is equally rigid and, ultimately, ineffective.

⁷ Or between Master Builders and artists, or Master Builders and authors, or Master Builders and “creatives”—choose whichever word satisfies you.

The functions of the Master Builders' Lego creations closely parallel to Dutton's three functions of language: the communicative/descriptive function, the imaginary function, and the fitness indicator function (172–173).⁸ But instead of a language of words, the Master Builders create works that use a language of bricks. But there is a problem. The Master Builders' power of manipulation appears to follow a grammar, since the rivets of the Lego bricks only allow for certain meaningful combinations, but the grammar is not well defined—especially in how it differs from the similar grammar which restrains the film's animators. In the hands of the animators, bricks form plumes of smoke, flowing water, and flashing lights. Yet it's clear that Master Builders are not able to alter bricks or manifest them out of thin-air. They must repurpose bricks from either nature or the creations of other builders.

Compounding these problems—or, perhaps, turning them into thematic points—*The Lego Movie* itself is also an imperfect multiauthored text formed by repurposing pieces of other texts. The film includes Dumbledore, Han Solo, and Batman. But the film is not *Harry Potter* or *Star Wars* or *Batman*. Lord Business's attempts to organize the world by removing everything that is “weird” is fundamentally destructive. But is repurposing the works of others any less destructive? To what extent are the Master Builders able to manipulate the language of bricks? Can works by multiple authors be successful? The final act of *The Lego Movie* answers some of these questions and complicates others.

Conclusions

“*My postulate is that all literature, in the end, is autobiographical.*” – Jorge Luis Borges,
“A Profession of Literary Faith,” 1926

⁸ The latter two functions are clear; the first could be amended to the slightly more general “practical/everyday” because the non-Master Builder minifigures in *The Lego Movie* don't communicate through Lego bricks (though they still manipulate Lego bricks in their daily lives, albeit without style or personality).

The final act begins after Emmet sacrifices himself, jumping into a portal that transports himself outside of the Lego world and onto the floor of the real world.⁹ A child named Finn picks Emmet up, a child who we learn is the author of Emmet's story. We are then interrupted by The Man Upstairs, Finn's father, who is furious that the child has been taking apart his creations. As Finn pleads with his father, it becomes clear that Emmet's story is an allegory for his own, and his father is Lord Business, on a quest to make things "how they're supposed to be." (When the child tells his dad he made a battleship, his father tells him, "No, it's a hodgepodge.") Emmet and Finn jointly make a speech to Lord Business and The Man Upstairs, which convinces Lord Business to put down the Kragle and convinces Finn's father to let him play with his Legos. Finn and his father's eventual agreement shows how creativity and conformity form a mutually-reliant duality; stories are born from their conflict—Emmet's story could not exist without the authoritarian regime that Finn's father and Lord Business provide. The ending of *The Lego Movie* also demonstrates how a multi-authored text can form a cohesive whole: by compromise.¹⁰

But when the credits roll, they roll over the background of Lego baseplates, each of which shows the Lego logo repeated hundreds of times. We're forced to ask: Is *The Lego Movie* artistically-pure literary work or a financially-driven commercial work? Upon its release, *The Lego Movie* received pretty-decent-though-not-perfect critical reviews. In film critic Genevieve Koski's article "One Year Later: *The Lego Movie*," we learn that *The Lego Movie* has a Rotten Tomatoes rating of 96%, that its Metacritic score is 83/100, its Letterboxed average grade is

⁹ Differences in animation style tell us whether Emmet is in the Lego world or the "real" world: Emmet still speaks in the real world, but his mouth doesn't move; there is more detail in the animated world; etc (see Appendix).

¹⁰ The final act does, however, complicate the problem of free-will. While Finn and his father are in conflict, and *The Lego Movie* is firmly in its "real"/human world, Emmet still speaks, thinks, and moves. It's unclear how much control over his own story.

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Lit 100 – Second Essay

3.9/4, and it got an A from Cinemascore. The film is an artistic success. But the film, made on a budget of about \$60 million, has so-far grossed over \$450 million. And it would be hard to believe there wasn't an uptick in Lego sales. The film is also, without a doubt, a commercial success. So is *The Lego Movie* more Finn, or is it more Lord Business? It couldn't exist without either.

Appendix



Friends of Emmet in the real world (above) and the animated Lego world (below).



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