

Critical essay

## ***Politics of Bricolage and the Double-sided Message of The LEGO Movie***

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### **Abstract**

With the release of *The Lego Movie* in 2014, Frankfurt School's critical theory once again finds an application in the contemporary media landscape. Its main postulates articulated by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer have never lost significance and relevance. New media products provide a convenient platform to engage in the discussion and reinforce some of the most influential critiques of the culture industries. Although with less negative dialect, the paper approaches Horkheimer's and Adorno's critique of mass culture in a contemporary media landscape referencing their most influential work of critical theory - *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The paper carefully examines the script of *The Lego Movie* and producers' interviews and relates those to the critical concepts of the culture industries. From the onset, *The Lego Movie* brings up a few controversial messages. First, the idea of creativity and imagination appears to be limited to the use of the brick, namely the Lego brick. Secondly, although the basic maxim of the movie is the promotion of self-identity and individuality, the development of these personal traits through the storyline is debatable. Finally, the producers' aim to criticize American mass culture and the culture industry is dubious as much as their claim to have no intention for the movie to serve as a commercial. The paradox of the latter is poignant since the critique of mass culture is embedded in the product of the same culture — the medium of the screen — the movie. The Lego movie uses a powerful medium to convey the message of the consumer culture – the colorful brick, which is easily recognized by kids all over the world. It is arguable whether the medium intensifies the messages disseminated through the movie. A massive increase in the sales of Lego sets after the movie's release may suggest an affirmative answer.

**Keywords:** Culture industry, critical theory, mass culture, Lego movie

## Introduction

The term “culture industry” was coined by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, philosophers of the Frankfurt School, in their canonical work “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception”, first published over sixty years ago as part of their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1972). Since then, it has seen numerous rebirths in scholarly works across different disciplines, has been “reconsidered” and critiqued in numerous scholarly articles, and has been revised by Adorno himself. In all his subsequent works, analysing popular music (jazz in particular), film, and radio, Adorno reiterated the same idea; that under monopoly capitalism, culture and art have become absorbed by economic forces. In their essay on the culture industry, Horkheimer and Adorno saw once autonomous culture as part of the industrial system, where the “authenticity” of culture is lost and all cultural products under capitalist monopoly are produced for the sake of profit, not for the sake of meeting one’s needs or wishes.

“Under monopoly all mass culture is identical, and the lines of its artificial framework begin to show through. The people at the top are no longer so interested in concealing monopoly: as its violence becomes more open, so its power grows. Movies and radio need no longer pretend to be art. The truth that they are just business is made into an ideology in order to justify the rubbish they deliberately produce. They call themselves industries; and when their directors’ incomes are published, any doubt about the social utility of the finished products is removed” (Horkheimer and Adorno, 121).

Culture has been deprived of all its heterogeneity and individuality. It has become homogenous and industrialized. The Fordist model of the assembly line has moved into the cultural domain where the “modern worker has been completely integrated into the industrial machine, a controlled automaton he now has his leisure time and his interiority programmed and controlled by modern industrial techniques” (O’Connor, 12).

The culture industry imposes conformity on the masses through commodified cultural products. Its main purpose is to grow capital and increase dominance, which is achieved by turning the audiences into the masses with no autonomous consciousness;

masses, who consume “culture” in a constant state of distraction. Through this process, instrumental rationality was transformed into “instrumental in the hands of Hollywood and the emergent monopoly concentration of capital in publishing, recording and advertising” (Lash and Lury, 2).

This paper is not yet another consideration of the negative dialectics with which Horkheimer and Adorno so harshly critiqued the culture industry. Nor is it a critique along the lines of the oppositional philosophy introduced by British cultural studies which rejected the idea of commercial “mass culture” as threatening the working class’ autonomy of thought and looked for ways of resistance that new forms of popular culture (i.e. subcultures) could provide. Rather, this work sides with the ideas of more recent scholarly work to argue that although the culture industry has changed in the last fifty to sixty years, its main influences remain the same. The culture industry has grown and expanded, changing its shape and form and penetrating deeper into the everyday life of consumers. The culture industry continues to impose conformity on masses and seeks to expand its dominance not only locally or nationally, but globally too. As Lash and Lury (2007) propose in *Global Culture Industry*, while culture could have been referred to as superstructure in the late 20th century, when cultural entities still seemed exceptional, with the turn of 21st century culture has become ubiquitous. They claim that “cultural objects are everywhere: as information, as communications, as branded products, as financial services, as media products, as transport and leisure services, cultural entities are no longer the exception: they are the rule” (Lash and Lury, 4). Drawing on specific aspects of Adorno and Horkheimer’s critical theory, namely the concepts of individuality, homogeneity and standardization, the paper will analyse the plot of a popular Hollywood product – The Lego Movie (2014). It will argue that the movie, while seeking to critique capitalism and the effects of mass culture, is actually promoting sameness and is skilfully serving as a perfect example of product placement.

### **Scope of Culture Industry Applied to the Movie Script Analysis**

Adorno’s critical theory might be referred to as quite radical, since “it aims at changing not merely specific aspects of contemporary society, but its whole social structure” (of which he speaks in terms of ‘late capitalism’) (Freyenhagen, 2). Essentially, global culture is a radical

expansion of what was defined as the culture industry by Frankfurt school theorists. Lash and Lury (2007) take a new approach to the culture industry by claiming that it has transformed to a global scale where everything is mediated, that is, “shaped and formed through media” (Couldry and Hepp, 1). While accepting this concept of expanded culture industry, the paper will refer to the term “culture industry” as originally used by Adorno and Horkheimer. In their “Culture Industry” essay, first published in 1947, the scholars referred to the culture industry as the product of standardization and distribution of mass culture to serve the profitable interests of capitalism.

Given the breadth and depth of Adorno’s scholarship, the scope of this paper will not permit to engage in a thorough discussion of his critical thinking about the culture industry as well as the changes that the culture industry has encountered and gone through since the first critical works were published. The aim is not to argue how much mass culture and the whole industry has changed and to what extent its products got “thingified” (Lash and Lury 4). Although the paper will educe certain claims as relevant to the provided arguments, the goal is to depict main claims by the culture industry theorists as to the effect the culture industry has on individuality, the homogeneity and conformity it enforces on people and to argue that they are still relevant in the current cultural landscape. The Lego Movie will serve as a tool illustrating enduring influences of the culture industry.

### **The Lego Movie**

Although the culture industry has grown in scope and it may no longer be “reduced” to entertainment business (as referred to by Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*), the main postulates of critical theory have found their application in a recent product by the Warner Bros. Inc. —The Lego Movie. It was released in 2014 and is rated as one of the most successful animated movies to entertain young audiences. The movie, which earned 450 million dollars at the box office<sup>1</sup>, was directed by Phil Lord and Chris Miller, produced by Warner Brothers and co-marketed by the LEGO Group. Movie characters are embodied by favourite building bricks and so far have

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.the-numbers.com/movie/LEGO-Movie-The#tab=summary>

received mostly positive reviews worldwide<sup>2</sup>. The movie's plot is structured around the life of the main character, Emmet (Chris Pratt). He is an ordinary LEGO figurine who always follows the rules and is erroneously identified as "The Special" — an extraordinary individual with the mission to save the world. Together with a group of master builders, Wyldstyle, Benny, Unikitty, and even Batman, Emmet embarks on a journey to stop the evil tyrant Lord Business (Will Ferrell) and his plans to conquer the world. The group of "Master Builders" has to prevent Lord Business from gluing the world of Lego with "Kraggle" super glue. In the final scenes, Emmet finds himself in the real world, where the story is being played out within the imagination of a boy, Finn. His father, a business-obsessed man, scolds his son for ruining the Lego sets by mixing the bricks and rebuilding his expensive collections. While Finn attempts to demonstrate that Lego bricks are for children, his father gets ready to glue the sets. Finally, the father accepts his son's creativity and becomes impressed with the creations. The movie culminates in a bond between the father and the son through the game of Lego.

The Lego Movie has been praised as a brilliant critique of American mass culture. However, an analysis of the script and the critical application of Adorno and Horkheimer's ideas lead to question whether the movie is critiquing the industry it serves. The script contains provocative messages. By exposing the effects of the culture industry on people The Lego Movie simultaneously expects the audience to succumb to the same power of the industry by ensuring further conformity through the use of the mass product — the Lego brick. The Lego brand is ingrained in the story line. The hidden agenda, even if denied by The Lego Movie producers, is to encourage the viewers "to buy and use its products even if they see through them" (Adorno, 167). The Lego Movie's illustration of the culture industry may be seen as too dense; however, it is an excellent example of what life becomes when entertainment industry and governments control the culture industry. We are all subjugated to the same products of mass culture. The ability to customize is yet another trickery by those who produce the products to sell "sameness" wrapped up in "uniqueness". Similarly to the colored plastic bricks in the movie we are bound to follow the rules, adhere to our routines, and display obedience.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the\\_lego\\_movie/reviews/](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_lego_movie/reviews/)

### **Commodification of the Movie Script**

In the guise of a children's motion picture, the movie is a great placement of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in front of the eyes of the audience with the goal of sending a message to the whole society. The culture industry produced "paradoxical commodity" which Adorno claimed "is so completely subject to the law of exchange that it is no longer exchanged; it is so blindly equated with use that it can no longer be used" (Ibid.). It blends with advertisement and *The Lego Movie* blatantly demonstrates it. The movie not only vividly demonstrates the many uses for the mini Lego bricks, but it also "locks us into certain forms of consumptive behavior" (Gunster, 41). With the release of *The Lego Movie*, one could suddenly buy everything from a toothbrush to a bedroom set illustrated with the characters and themes from the movie.

Adorno claimed that culture has lost its immunity to commodification and reification and he famously stated that "the cultural entities typical of culture industry are no longer also commodities they are commodity through and through" (Adorno, 2). Cultural commodity is a good since it can be translated into the exchange value — money. As goods, commodities become certain value units which are exchanged on the market for profit and are produced for the sake of increasing revenues of the industries. Commodity in a global culture industry, as Lash and Lury state, has transformed into a brand, which no longer can be readily exchanged. It does not encompass value ready units and does not exist as a "good" on the market (Lash and Lury, 2007). The Lego brand serves the purpose to illustrate this position and support the argument that the culture industry has matured into a global culture industry with its own distinctive features and characteristics. According to Lash and Lury, global culture industry does not operate through commodities as the culture industry did, but through brands (Lash and Lury, 5). Culture has not only been commodified, but largely branded and this is what major corporations, including the LEGO Group, stand for. LEGO is not only a very successful producer of toys, but it has also grown to embrace almost every aspect of its fans' life: from theme and entertainment parks, branded souvenirs and common use goods, to launching a hugely successful movie, which is going to have its sequel released in 2019.

The movie uses a great medium to tell the story – the Lego brick, which was deliberately chosen by the producers. It is

recognisable, playful and widely acceptable as a “cool” toy by children worldwide. Since the movie is a representation of both the product and the brand, it is a good analytical tool to examine how the culture industry is not only a powerful dictator of sameness and uniformity, but also expands its influence to a global scale. The LEGO Group has become a mass producer of extensive experiences, which is what a brand in general stands for, globally, and this concurs with Lash and Lury’s arguments pertaining to global culture.

### **Meaningful Characteristics of the Lego Figurines**

Emmet Brickowsky is the main character in *The Lego Movie*. He is a Lego minifigure, “builder” who embarks on a journey to stop the evil Lord Business. The “Lord” seems to have been chosen purposefully to point to other movie villains such as Lord Voldemort (*Harry Potter*) and Lord Vader (*Star Wars*). By combining “lord” and “business” the movie blends totalitarian rule with multinational capitalism and “implies totalitarian omnipotence with the domination of multinational capitalism” (Roberts, 2014). The character of Lord Business represents everything that is negative in a corporate world — big name brands exercising the power of control, imposing conformity and creating mass consumer culture. Lord Business is a villain who owns every piece of entertainment and wishes to exercise control over the population of the Lego city of Bricksburg. Emmet is a perfect example of Adorno and Horkheimer's duped consumer who is completely immersed in the world constructed for him by a capitalist system. This world consists of repetitive, routinized and mind-numbing activities, which residents of the city do not seem to mind. The radio repetitively airs a pop hit “Everything is awesome” and TV broadcasts the same sitcom “Where are my pants?”

Mass media serve the purpose of molding the listeners and viewers into the obedient servants of the culture industry: “films and radio are nothing but business and they are used as an ideology to legitimize the trash they intentionally produce” (Horkheimer and Adorno, 42). All media is formed into a system, which, as Horkheimer and Adorno argued, enforces uniformity: “Culture today is infecting everyone with sameness. Film, radio, and magazines form a system, which is uniform as a whole and in every part. Each branch of culture is unanimous within itself and all are unanimous together” (Horkheimer and Adorno 120). Lord Business is well aware of the power that radio and TV have on imposing uniformity. It is the

system that each Bricksburg citizen trusts unquestionably. When creative and free-spirited minifigure Wyldstyle addresses all through the enormous TV screen, she unequivocally confirms: "I am on TV so you can trust me".

### **Pseudo-individuation and Individuality**

According to Adorno, any individual in the culture industry is an illusionary subject. This illusion is not only due to the standardization of mass-produced commodities, but also to the fact that individual is only "tolerated as long as his complete identification with the generality is unquestionable" (154). Each builder in the Lego city is useful and recognized as a lawful resident as long as he/she unwaveringly complies with the order established by Lord Business. On condition that citizens serve the interests of Lord Business and his Octan Corporation, they can continue to live their miserable lives. They are completely devalued in the eyes of the corporation that runs their city. As individuals they "disappear before the apparatus which /they/ serve" (xiv). Emmet's life is consumed by the apparatus of Lord Business. His inner life is compartmentalized and regimented according to the needs of the system and as a builder he turns into the "proficient apparatus" himself (167). His day is carefully structured and filtered down to taking (what seems to be) the same steps. The manner in which he takes each step appears to be carefully planned as not to disrupt the arranged assembly line of the Lego city's order.

This is an illustrative example of the culture industry with its "potentialities for promoting or blocking 'integral freedom'" (Adorno, 2). Only the corporate power in the Lego city does not promote, but constantly and diligently suppresses even an opportunity for an individual thought. Individuality in the city of Bricksburg is so concealed that later in the movie Emmet goes through numerous struggles to acknowledge its existence within. Every resident of the Lego city has ceased to be him or her since individuality has been swallowed by the corporate power. Uniqueness of an individual is impossible and this gets reinforced in the statements by the same Lego minifigures when they refer to Emmet as "nothing". Even the personal life of a Lego citizen is confirmative of the imposed structure: "everyone must show that they identify wholeheartedly with the power which beats them...Individuals are tolerated only as

far as their wholehearted identity with the universal is beyond question" (Adorno, 124).

Although there is no room for individuality in the Lego city, there is really no identifiable concept of the team either. The term "team player" loses its positive meaning of productivity. Being a team player in Bricksburg means being compliant and being like everyone else in the population. Lord Business needs exactly that — a homogeneous mass which is easily directed and oriented towards achieving the goals that are only beneficial to him. The culture industry is directed towards incorporation and supremacy. It is obsessed with the unification of all the objects over which it exerts power. As such it is also oriented towards organizing "free time", which Adorno calls the "remnant domain of freedom" (Adorno, 4). There is hardly free or spare time for the citizen of Bricksburg. Similarly, there is no real entertainment and amusement in the city either. Radio programs and TV shows are constantly the same and Taco Tuesday seems to be the "real" and only entertainment for the Lego city residents even if it, in fact, means cheap tacos. The books in Emmet's room are illustrative of the sameness ideology being imprinted on the individuals: "How to fit in" and "Everybody to like you". Even if each minifigure superficially has his or her own life after work, it implies "the prolongation of work" that Adorno proposed in his analysis. The sameness of TV and radio programs or sports in Bricksburg is aimed at controlling mindless citizens both at work and off work and "recruiting strength in order to be able to cope" with the same mechanized work (Adorno, 7). The audience which Adorno named as "dupes of mass deception" with "no autonomy of consciousness" is embodied by the Lego minifigures (21). When Emmet meets with Master builders (intended to be free and creative individuals outside the world of the Lord Business), he admits that he "has never had an original thought in his life".

The culture industry unifies many under one. Any kind of individuality is inconceivable since only a mass of mindless citizens can be molded into what Lord Business needs. Any "weird" structure in the city must be destroyed so as not to threaten Lord Business's "stuff", by which he means everything in the city that is created according to his wishes. Culture industry has nothing in common with freedom. As Adorno states, "it proclaims: you shall conform, without instruction as to what; conform to that which exists anyway, and to that which everyone thinks anyways as a reflex of its power

and omnipresence” (Adorno, 17). Adorno goes further by emphasizing that the culture industry suppresses individual consciousness and silences reflexivity: “the culture industry is the societal realization of the defeat of reflection: it is the realization of subsumptive reason” (Adorno and Bernstein, 11). Builders in Bricksburg have lost any possibility of reflecting on what is going on in the city. In fact, they do not seem to have that capacity at all. The ideology of the Lord Business and his Octan Corporation does not get questioned: “the order that springs from it is never confronted with what it claims to be or with the real interests of human beings” (Adorno, 17).

The order of the Lego metropolis is shocking. All cars in the city move at the same velocity, with the same distance from each other, and are parked at the same time. The architecture and buildings, although clearly resembling possibilities provided by the Lego blocks, are shapeless even if comprised of differently designed buildings. They are the reminder of a similar real life metropolitan city core and reveal a scrupulously planned and developed rigid structure. The sameness of the Lego city architecture blends well with the uniformity of its population. Monotony reigns across the city and it is exactly what the culture industry is synonymous with: “culture now impresses the same stamp on everything” (Horkheimer and Adorno, 120). Such a stamp is easier to press when all individuals are issued firm instructions by the Octan Corporation. Since builders in the city are deemed to have no mental capability to think for themselves, they receive instructions for everything. When Emmet is thrown out into the realm of “otherness”, which exists outside Lord Business’s kingdom, he starts frantically uttering the words “what do I do. I don’t have instructions”.

### **Standardization and distraction**

In Bricksburg, residents are greeted by the catchy beat of the pop hit “Everything is awesome” (performed by Tegan and Sara and the Lonely Island), which ensures the citizens are compliant with Lord Business’s plans and have no space to generate alternative thoughts: “everything is awesome/ everything is cool when you’re part of the team/ everything is better when we stick together/ side by side, you and I gonna win forever/ we are the same, I’m like you, you’re like me, we’re all working in harmony/ lost my job, it’s a new opportunity/ more free time for my awesome community/ a Nobel

Prize, a piece of string/You know what's awesome? Everything!"<sup>3</sup>. The rigorously controlled means of mass media in the city allow for total control on what is being broadcasted to the population. The song airs repeatedly throughout the day and inscribes the "awesomeness" standard into the lives of its listeners. Standardization, especially in popular music, has been profoundly critiqued by Adorno and deserves a much more detailed account than is provided here. e referred to standardization as "the strengthening of the lasting domination of the listening public and of their conditioned reflexes" (Bronner, 202). The public is "expected to want only that to which they have become accustomed and to become enraged whenever their expectations are disappointed and fulfillment, which they regard as the customer's inalienable right, is denied." (202). Adorno was explicitly concerned with the standardization as brought up by the capitalist industrial system. The most concerning trait of standardization for him was the "pseudo-individuation", by which Adorno means:

"endowing cultural mass production with the halo of free choice or open market on the basis of standardization itself. Standardization of song hits keeps the customers in line doing their thinking for them, as it were. Pseudo-individuation, for its part, keeps them in line by making them forget that what they listen to is wholly intended for them or predigested." (Adorno in Andrea, 5).

The obviously infectious beat of the song aims exactly at this – standardization of thought. The regression of hearing is common to all citizens of Bricksburg. Everyone is appearing to do exactly what the song is telling them to – be happy since everything is awesome. Being happy about who they are and what they do, the individuals are taught to be like everyone else. Everybody is content with the status quo of bricolage, they are happy no matter what happens. They are happy even when they all pull in to get an overpriced \$37 dollar cup of coffee.

### **Perfection of the Status Quo and Hope for Resistance**

As much as the culture industry is occupied with retaining the existing state of affairs without allowing an alternative status quo,

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<sup>3</sup> Song and lyrics at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=StTqXEQ2l-Y>

Lord Business, fearing an upheaval which may end his powerful reign, makes plans to literally fix the current situation of his world. He finds a superglue named "Kraggle", which seems to be the ultimate way to glue existing structures. This capitalistic desire to integrate all and dominate every single individual of the population in Bricksburg permeates all of Lord Business's intentions and conversations. The glue seems to be a great weapon to freeze the status quo and maintain it indefinitely.

Adorno was critical of Marx's belief that capitalist forces are able to generate a free society and the movie demonstrates exactly this. Capital does not embody emancipatory power. Capitalist production "confines them, body and soul, that they fall helpless victims to what is offered them" (Blunden, 12). The nucleus of change lies within a society or within instrumental reason, which Adorno provocatively debated on. Adorno's original polemic contained deep negativity towards enlightenment and people's ability to resist the manipulation of industrialised culture. He argued that while instrumental reason may suggest the ways that lead to liberation from the influence of the culture industry, it also works as a scheme of further integration and domination. In order for the emancipation to be true and real, reason must bear the "possibility to judge particulars and universal and rationally consider ends and goals", since without this possibility reason "which was to be the means to satisfying human ends becomes its own end" (Adorno and Bernstein, 5).

Horkheimer's and Adorno's uncompromising critique of the culture industry, its segmentation and mass consumerism nevertheless contained a grain of hope for a possible resistance. Although society, according to these thinkers, is ruled by the exploitative economy, there is a possibility for a social transformation and autonomy. The Lego Movie attempts to illustrate this possibility through the power of resistance, embodied in the forces of creativity and imagination. Since this power has been discovered in the ordinary builder figure, which has absolutely nothing unique about him, the producers are possibly implying that each of us can discover similar power within. The message is controversial, since it is delivered by the Lego brick. Unconsciously, we are reminded that a popular brand has tools, i.e. plastic building blocks, to awaken our creativity.

By a series of unfortunate events Emmet is named the "Special One" and becomes the only hope of, what seems to be, a free spirited underground movement to liberate the world from the rule of Lord Business. However, since he, as many others in Lord Business's world, was suppressed and controlled for so long, Emmet is struggling to discover the needed qualities of resistance within. When he enters the colorful Lego world "Cloud Cuckoo Land", Emmet cannot believe there are no signs and no instructions. He exclaims in astonishment: "no signs or anything. How does anyone know what to do? There is no government, no bedtimes, no frowny faces, no negativity of any kind". Resistance is constantly suppressed by the culture industry through repetitiveness, sameness, and the ubiquity of mass culture, which ensures automatized reactions by individuals and reduces the possibility of any opposition.

Shortly before his death, Adorno withdrew the critique of the culture industry's manipulation and complete commercialisation. In response to the critical theory of the Frankfurt school, Marxists attempted to prove the limitedness of the culture industry's exploitation and claimed that resistance is always alive among audiences. However, to do justice to Adorno's position regarding the culture industry's domination, historical circumstances must be taken into consideration to better understand his theoretical stance. After fleeing Germany from the Nazis regime, he became pessimistic in witnessing the production of mass culture in the United States. One of his students noted after Adorno's death:

"Adorno's negation of late capitalist society has remained abstract, closing itself to the need for the specificity of the determinate negation, that dialectic category of the Hegel-Marx tradition to which Adorno had always been greatly indebted. In his last work, *Negative Dialectics*, historical materialism's concept of praxis is no longer questioned in terms of social change in its concrete historical forms, bourgeois forms of communication and proletarian forms of organization. The withering of the class struggle is mirrored in his critical theory as the atrophy of the materialist conception of history" (Huysen, 6).

Despite the critique of "total negation", manipulation of the culture industry still endures. The exploitation, control and domination by Lord Business is an illustration of the control that the culture industry exercises under monopoly capitalism.

As a viewer later learns in the movie, Lord Business represents a real person: a father, a man, a businessman whose hobby is to collect Lego bricks. He does not let his son play with the enormous collection of Legos in the basement and, similarly to Lord Business, seeks to keep the sets as they are. The father and the son finally rediscover their connection when both find their mutual interest in the game with Lego bricks. While the latter may imply the producers' intention to encourage kids be creative, the message is controversial. A prerequisite for a parent and child bond, free play and imagination appears to be a tiny Lego brick. It is both the liberation from the culture industry hegemony and further integration by the use of its products. The latter has worked phenomenally: after the movie's release, sales of Lego sets skyrocketed and the demand for replicas of Lego worlds in the movie increased significantly. It is as if the movie "prescribed each reaction, not through any actual adherence — which collapse once exposed to thought — but through signals" (Adorno, 52). Lego bricks have become that signal to consume more.

Although promoting a way to emancipation, the movie script does not really anticipate any possibility of such freedom in the real world. Created to increase the capital of both the entertainment business and the corporation, the movie arguably does not expect a viewer to seek liberation from capitalist forces, but hopes for further integration of him or her and further domination of the industry. In the end, the audience is being controlled by the very same industry that Lord and Miller so sarcastically criticize. As Adorno states: "the culture industry remains the entertainment business. Its control of consumers is mediated by entertainment, and its gold will not be broken by anything which is more than itself" (Adorno, 51).

### **The Development of the LEGO Brand and Its Representation in the Movie**

The Lego Movie is more than just a family movie. It is a demonstration of increased profits and popularity of Lego products. Lego is not only offered to consumers through the screen, but imprinted on their minds as a brand, which finds its embodiment in a range of products worldwide. The brand's global presence is illustrative of the direction that the culture industry is taking in general. Global culture industry takes over the world of creativity and imagination with the force of "thingification" (Lash and Lury, 2007).

Its source is the brand which is always alive and comes into being in a variety of ways (ibid.).

While the movie is a perfect example of how the culture industry influences its consumers, the development of the brand itself illustrates the growth of that influence over the years. Therefore, it makes sense to look into how the Lego brand began and what it has become.

Similarly to many global corporations in the cultural and entertainment spheres, LEGO started as a small company. It was launched as a wooden toy producer in Denmark, where the company acquired the name of LEGO (the words “leg” and “godt” mean “play well” in Danish while the word LEGO means “I put together” in Latin (Lauwaert, 222)). With the introduction of new materials and manufacturing practices, LEGO switched from timber to plastic and witnessed a change in interaction between the products and children. Plastic figures were easier to put together and the flexibility of connecting them expanded the end designs further.

In 1970s the Lego brick was a simple construction block. It had a simple shape, it was easy to connect and it had a few main colors: green, red, brown, blue. Children were able to make anything they wanted and build any construction that came into their minds. The Lego brick was a child’s toy, which allowed his individuality, his uniqueness, his ideas and a truly childish game to shine through. As a construction toy it offered undisruptive play for days by creating new stories over and over again. In *The Lego Movie* these bricks are brought back to the screen as the main construction material of “*The Old West*”. It does not only signify the old days of simple Lego bricks, which required imagination to be constructed in certain ways, but also provides a glimpse of the authentic cowboy and saloon culture of America. In the early years of Lego toys children were only restricted by the amounts of bricks they had, not by the instruction leaflet or an image on the box. It is possible that the world of “*The Old West*” is the producers’ expostulation to the LEGO Group for causing certain creativity stagnation in the form of a simple child’s play with construction toys.

“The rationality of the Lego system is shocking. You cannot build an irregular construction from these blocks, or something shapeless, there will always have to be a right angle somewhere. You can only do what the rational system allows you to do. What is more,

theoretically everyone can build whatever he or she want, but in practice you build what is shown on the box” (Varul, 4).

A viewer is presented with pre-existing Lego characters who have their own characteristics, traits and pre-defined roles. These restrict children in developing their own story with their own unique characters in it. A child playing with an “Emmett toy is generally tied to the personality The Lego Movie has already given them; children are unable to invent a new character for themselves, and therefore are unable to practice genuine originality and creativity” (Treece, 12). With pre-dispositioned traits and set narratives the world of imagination is being recreated into the world of a pre-designed story. Imagination “is replaced by a mechanically relentless control mechanism which determines whether the latest imago to be distributed really represents an exact, accurate and reliable reflection of the relevant item of reality” (Adorno, 64).

As a global corporation, the LEGO Group has gone through many transformations. Most of them have been market, technology, and digital media driven. The Lego brick has been challenged to meet many needs; a toy, a computer game, a designer’s and/or architect’s tool, a movie producer’s medium, etc. The ubiquitous presence of the brand in so many aspects of children’s lives point to nothing less than “hyper-commercialization of children’s culture which among other effects, has seriously eroded the creative, imaginative dimensions of children’s play” (Gunster, 791). LEGO company is not only a toy manufacturer anymore; they have woven the web of internet media platforms, educational programs, theme parks, souvenirs, pens, books, clothing, etc. Reference to the Global culture industry made by Lash and Lury cannot be more precise. The following quote defines the scope well:

“The LEGO Group has the world’s biggest subscription-based club for boys, with 4.2 million members in 14 countries. We want to help these users become closer to the company and increase their use of the product. So, we launched LEGO M.B.A., that is, the LEGO master building academy. This is intended to help the kids become better builders and learn more about the brand. If you’re really into the LEGO brand that’s just the coolest thing” (Kalcher, 10).

It is obvious that the Lego brand has obtained global presence and is undeniably enjoying its benefits. Starting as a toy and developing into a lifestyle for children and grown-ups, it is no longer

truly promoting free play and creativity. The Lego Movie is just another way to win the hearts of more consumers.

### **Dubious Message of the Lego Movie**

The culture industry is aimed at creating false needs and false solutions. The Lego Movie producers' intent to foster imagination and individuality cannot be readily applied in real life. Emmet is able to conquer his solitude and unshackle the autocratic rule of Lord Business; however, this seems to be easily applicable only in the world of Lego bricks. Moreover, the movie does not suggest any tangible solutions, which could be applied by its viewers fighting similar demons in real life, unless one is able to buy preposterous amounts of Lego bricks and start constructing the Lego worlds. It could arguably be said that the culture industry "is leading the perplexed, it deludes them with false conflicts which they are to exchange for their own." (Horkheimer and Adorno, 17). Although this is not to claim that The Lego Movie is "deluding audience with false conflicts". It could genuinely be offering a solution to escape influences of the culture industry through reason, reflexivity and imagination. Nevertheless, it offers the solutions to the conflicts "only in appearance in a way that they can hardly be solved in their real lives" (Adorno, 17). The individuality that the movie seeks to promote is questionable as well. What exactly do we define as individualistic in terms of the commodity by mass or popular culture? "The culture industry can only manipulate individuality so successfully because the fractured nature of society has always been reproduced within it" (Durham and Kellner, 64). The movie creates fake identities and the promise of individuality which is centered around one resource — the Lego brick. As long as the boy's father allows him to use his expensive collection of Lego bricks he can indulge in a free play. It seems that none of these desired and emancipatory traits exist outside the Lego world unless you own a Lego set.

Lord and Miller, directors of the movie, refute the intention to promote Lego products to the viewers. The movie, however, is entirely built around their use. Even audience members who were not familiar with Lego products before get acquainted through easily identifiable movie characters and minifigures embodying them. It is as if Adorno had predicted it: "advertising and the culture industry are merging technically no less than economically. In both, the same

thing appears in countless places, and the mechanical repetition of the same culture product is already that of the same propaganda slogan” (Adorno, 69). Both producers meant the movie to be a satire — laughing at the effects the culture industry exerts on masses. Still they make a mockery of themselves by critiquing the same industry they serve. The laughter is really laughter at themselves or as Adorno would put it “there is laughter but there is nothing to laugh at” (140).

While the producers justify the utilisation of Lego products in the production as being “cool” mediums to tell the story, this sounds preposterous. It is similarly difficult to believe that the producers deny the intention to critique consumer culture, corporate power and culture industries. If the producers only needed a fun and cool medium to engage the viewers and keep them entertained, it is concerning that they were not able to foresee the effects of the culture industry inscribed in the storyline. It is not the aim of this paper to dispute the real intent of the producers and probably neither the production company, nor the corporation can be unconditionally blamed for creating binaries that are quite common in the media. The paper is questioning the medium used, the ideas depicted and the message that the movie sends to the audiences. The logics of the culture industry are still analytically the same. The mind annihilating effect of the movie removes the ability to reflect and resist the influence of the culture industry.

### **Future of Culture Industries and Globalization**

Despite the discussed controversy, The Lego Movie serves as an epitome to the culture industry. It is a great embodiment of the critical ideas Horkheimer and Adorno introduced in their seminal essay. The homogeneity, conformity, commodification and mind numbing effects of cultural products cannot be denied. Their ability to completely destroy any individuality and reason has already been withdrawn by Adorno himself and thus, can probably only stay as an illustration of such effect in The Lego Movie. Nevertheless, the result of increased activity in online forums and launch of new online platforms is obvious. Similarly, users’ interaction with the media produced commodities has already been witnessed. We are facing changes in the culture industries, which not only acquired a plural form, but are also more frequently labelled as “creative industries”. The latter shift the focus to de-commodification when certain cultural goods are identified containing public value. Socio-technical

possibilities have opened the stage for a completely different interaction and co-creation by the audience. Culture industries have also expanded outside the borders of the Western world. The ways through which the culture industry exerts influence on consumers are possibly the reasons why it has been transformed to Global culture industry (Lash and Lury, 2007). Lash and Lury claim that in Global culture industry the media become things. We live in a world where media is operational. In this environment we do things with media and through media. Cultural commodities are no longer just the products of the culture industry. They have become things of experience and difference — brands. Media as medium “has become matter and matter has become image: things and things media” (Lash and Lury, 9). The culture industry is shifting from homogeneity to major heterogeneity, however not in a positive sense. Global industries are searching for market niches and differences which can be offered to consumers as their ultimate satisfaction of becoming creative individuals. Cultural production tools hold the potential for communication, collaboration and emancipation, but this potential is now turned against the “power of global and imperial capital” (182). Theoretical debates on terminology and analysis of the transformation in cultural environment and what it entails requires further analysis. Similarly, the relationships it constructs with audiences and consequences it has on people need to be thoroughly examined.

As for *The Lego Movie*, it is a perfect way to deliver the brand to global audiences. While demonstrating the dangers we face succumbing to the influence of the culture industry, it is a vivid representation of it. The omnipresence of the brand has been strengthened with *The Lego Movie* release. The profits that the corporation reaps are undeniable. Thus, it is difficult to recognise a positive effect that the movie allegedly has on its younger audiences. Although we can laugh at the stupidity of minifigures in the movie, the script is actually reflecting our own world and its experiences. It is also disturbing that the individuality, creativity and non-conformism is promoted by the product of the same culture industry, which is none of those things.

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