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Culture

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Hidden messages

Critics have called The Lego Movie "practically communist" because of its depiction of a quasi-proletarian revolt against the villainous President Business. (Warner Bros)

Critics claim recent films contain subversive political messages. Could pro-business Hollywood be knowingly embracing anti-establishment views?



By Tom Brook
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The movie Noah, opening later this month, is moving into a maelstrom of controversy as religious conservatives decry the film for straying from the biblical story of Noah's Ark.

Among the concerns is that Noah, starring Russell Crowe and directed by Darren Aronofsky, is advancing a liberal agenda. Brian Godawa, a California filmmaker who specialises in spiritual stories, cares for the environment but speaks for many in the religious community when he says: "Christians don't want their sacred story to be turned into a parable for environmentalism!"

In recent years accusations of a perceived agenda have been made against a wide range of Hollywood movies. Sometimes the charges come as a surprise. The creators of 2011's Happy Feet Two, a children's story about a penguin reluctant to dance, found a Christian movie website had judged their film to be loaded with messages. According to Movieguide: The Family Guide To Movie Reviews, the picture had a "very strong mixed pagan, politically correct worldview promoting homosexual same-sex partnerships and homosexual adoption and promoting radical environmentalism and global warming hysteria throughout."

Building blocks of criticism

One of the more frequently voiced complaints is that Hollywood films have a left-wing agenda. Even though it has made handsome profits with box office takings in excess of \$360m worldwide, enough to make any capitalist happy, The Lego Movie, released last month, was singled out as being "practically communist" **by one American reviewer** who was by no means alone in his assessment.

This children's animation, populated by characters made up of the well-known interlocking toy bricks, has as its prime antagonist a rather unpleasant CEO called President Business, voiced by Will Ferrell. The film satirises corporate practice. Charles Payne, a contributor to the Fox Business Network, **expressed grave concern** over the content of The Lego Movie. On the air he declared: "Hollywood has its own agenda and we're used to this, but it feels a little bit more threatening when they start to push this out to our kids over and over."

The Lego Movie is part of what Hollywood's critics might call its ongoing anti-corporate, pro-liberal agenda – a trend that's been evident for decades. As far back as 1936, Charlie Chaplin brought moviegoers a satire of industrial capitalism with his classic *Modern Times*, in which he played a worker with no autonomy stripped of his dignity on an assembly line.

Much more recently, in 2008 the Disney animated picture *Wall-E* was described as anti-capitalist – or anti-consumption – because it featured video-addicted humans too fat to walk and controlled by a gigantic corporation that had rendered them moronic.

The following year brought director James Cameron's *Avatar* which was described as Marxist in some circles. It depicted a US mining corporation cruelly expanding its activities on the planet Pandora, threatening the indigenous people and its ecosystem.

Many of the films with alleged anti-corporate subtexts are made by Hollywood studios who are part of big media conglomerates. It's interesting to ponder whether or not studio executives fully recognise the content of so-called 'subversive' pictures before they give them the green light. Did Warner Bros, for instance, scrutinise *The Lego Movie's* screenplay and see that it had what many are describing as an overtly anti-corporate subtext – and, if so, did they care?

Noah Gittell, who writes on films and politics for *The Atlantic* thinks "they probably did see it. I think it's a delicate thing, and I'm not sure whether these movies really push an anti-corporate message or whether this is a case of an industry co-opting that message, and I think the jury's still out on that one," he says.

These allegedly anti-business films are perhaps in some way trying to tap into topical anxieties. Opinion polls show that Americans, while concerned about corporate influence, see big government and its impact on their lives as a greater threat. But it is true that in many communities Americans routinely deal with faceless corporations in areas of life where they used to turn to individuals or smaller institutions. This can cause frustration and is particularly true in areas of health care and education.

To Gittell, Hollywood is responding to real concerns. "Americans and other people around the world have grown weary and skeptical of corporate influence," he says, "and it's reflecting that in our films. The cluster of films that exist is evidence that Hollywood thinks this is a message America wants to hear right now."

Corporate cosmology

Studios may well be backing films that have ostensibly anti-business themes because in reality they're very corporate friendly. Toby Miller, author of *Global Hollywood 2*, thinks *The Lego Movie* is hardly anti-corporate, especially when you discover the true colours of the demonised CEO. "The supposedly nasty corporate figure turns out to be loving, malleable, pliant and even a good dad," he says. The picture is also designed to promote consumption. Miller notes, "The entire movie is about Lego and how Lego is a wonderful toy – it's a commercial."

In a way the peddling of these allegedly subversive films shows just how accommodating corporate capitalism can be in generating profits by selling consumers a film that appears to be anti-establishment.

"Corporate bashing in movies is something that corporations are very good at making money on," says political essayist Emmett Rensin. "This has been true for a long time. Very large corporations are good at actually profiting off of criticism of themselves by selling it to people. You can buy your counterculture from a mainstream cultural institution which maybe neutralises it to some extent."

Studios only really get significantly involved in patrolling films deemed to have an "agenda" if there's a threat to the box office. Darren Aronofsky has made it clear that he wants to depict Noah as "the first environmentalist." Mindful this could alienate religious audiences, a key group that Paramount Pictures is targeting, the studio has for quite some time been engaged in reportedly tense negotiations with Aronofsky over the film's storyline.

Really, the bottom line for Hollywood is that so long as its films make money, there's little concern over content. Also, Hollywood is hardly an anti-establishment agitating force – the studios are not going to back films which encourage the citizenry to rise up – but this doesn't mean the satire that emerges is neutral or lame.

Eric Brown, a political writer at the [International Business Times](#), clearly sees *The Lego Movie's* theme song *Everything is Awesome* as an astute reflection on corporate control. It satirises an obedient citizenry that behaves well and allows itself to be exploited by corporations – all with the aim of making money. The refrain is the kind of anthem

you'd expect to hear employees with happy faces singing at a US corporate retreat: "Everything is awesome. Everything is cool when you're part of a team. Everything is awesome, when we're living our dream!"

So the news that there's now going to be a sequel in the wake of the spectacular success of The Lego Movie may possibly have prompted life to imitate art in Hollywood with some in the film world responding with the rejoinder: "Everything is awesome!"

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