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A Tale of Creativity and Imagination

The LEGO Story of Flannery O'Connor

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171

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Brickfilming began as a tribute to the famous Danish construction toy that is now approaching its 100th anniversary. The LEGO company was founded when Flannery O'Connor was seven, but her toys, as seen in her photographs, are more traditional. However, one could argue that LEGO bricks encourage the construction of worlds, just as fiction does. A LEGO brick is the material equivalent of an idea with which all creative minds begin. Over the past few decades, one technological advancement has led to another, but what opened up the field of stop-motion animation was the democratization, that is increased and wider access to toys, personal computers, cameras, and, more recently, video-editing software and digital media. Nevertheless, the production of brickfilms remains time-consuming and energy-intensive, thus relying on the labor of love that only fans are willing to expend.

Stop-motion animation has a forty-year tradition, with *The Magic Portal* (1989) as a main landmark. Since the craft of brickfilming needs to be learned, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, websites and online forums such as Brickfilms.com and BricksInMotion began to organize tutorials, competitions, and, most importantly, provided a place to share films. YouTube has become a major platform that serves these purposes. In turn, inspired by the brickfilming community, in 2014, the LEGO company began releasing “The LEGO Movie” and its sequels. The scale and ambition of these productions dwarf any homemade brickfilm. However, the competition is not lost because what matters is the idea, and fans have those, too.

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To create the illusion of movement, brick filmmakers must not only master the craft of animation but also have endless patience. The limitations of LEGO minifigures present a challenge in conveying thoughts and emotions. This is, however, an area in which the brickfilm can draw on the art of cartooning that fascinated Flannery O'Connor (Gooch 2009: 72–73, 94–96, 121–122). In both brickfilms and cartoons, a tiny detail on a face or body, which otherwise exposes the crudeness of any representation, has a meaning that the viewer has been trained over the years to recognize. The technique of close-up is also shared by cartoons and film genres.

Five years ago, Silleck Family Productions made its debut as a stop-motion animation group with *The Killers*, an adaptation of Ernest Hemingway's 1927 short story. The movie is available on Vimeo, with only a trailer on YouTube. The black-and-white adaptation belongs to the tradition of film noir. In a short video *Behind the Scenes with Silleck Family Productions*, Sean Silleck – the lead animator, director, and screenwriter – explains that the group specializes in adapting classic American short stories, and mentions an adaptation of Nelson Algren's "The Face on the Barroom Floor" as their second production. At that point, "A Good Man is Hard to Find" was just a plan.

Dedicated to Flannery O'Connor and based on her short story, the 20-minute film "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" (Silleck Family Productions 2021) is faithful to the original, evoking the core themes, general tenor, and the most memorable quotes from the short story. The use of bricks and the squarish unwieldiness of the minifigures make the characters and settings all the more grotesque. The lines indicating variable facial expressions are, however, visible in close-ups. So are also the face and the naked torso of the Misfit. The bright colors of all the bricks and props (including the grandmother's pink suitcase) contrast sharply with the grim ending. The juxtaposition of childlike imagery and serious themes, of the playful medium and the grim story, adds irony and poignancy to the narrative. The movie's thematized grotesqueness is both engaging and provocative.

A family that consists of a mother, a father, two children, and a grandmother is on vacation. On the way, their car passes uncanny-looking landmarks (strange trees and a chained monkey). Although inevitably reductive in comparison with the original text, the film draws the viewer's attention to the elements that the reader might easily overlook, such as a cemetery on a former plantation. Highlighting this episode not only reveals the grandmother's nostalgia for plantation life but also foreshadows the gruesome end of the family's escapade. The reference to a monkey in O'Connor's text is just as easy to overlook and far more difficult to interpret: "Red Sammy was lying on the bare ground outside The Tower [where they stop for 'barbecued sandwiches'] with his head under a truck while a gray monkey about a foot high, chained to a small chinaberry tree, chattered nearby. The monkey sprang back into the tree and got on the highest limb as soon as he saw the children jump out of the car and run toward him" (O'Connor 1988: 140–141). The filmmakers kept the ambiguous episode with the chained monkey, thus redefining proportions and the hierarchy of meaning, which in itself may be the essence of brickfilming in general, or even games as such.

There is no baby in the film (in contrast to the short story), but the two grandchildren are perfect exemplars of the youngest generation. Their ruthless disregard is captured at every stage of the journey. The mother is reticent, a non-presence, as she is also in

the story. Bailey, the grandmother's boy, wears a brightly colored shirt with a pattern that differs from that in the story (parrots are replaced with palm trees), but it is equally absurd. The Misfit puts the shirt on after Bailey's execution. At the climactic moment, when the grandmother tells the Misfit (the only real match for her polite bossiness) that he is one of her babies, this shirt is a weak excuse for what might appear to be a case of mistaking one person for another because of the clothes that person is wearing, if the viewer blocks out the grandmother's religious epiphany.

The meticulous crafting of each scene, the attention to detail in the intricate and changing sets, the use of light and shadow, the voice acting, and the ambient sounds make for a well-rounded production. The limitations of the LEGO figures in expressing nuanced emotions are made up for by the voice acting, which is convincing. The deep voice of the grandmother (Sean Silleck) is matched by the deceptive monotony of the Misfit's (Owen Silleck) tone. The filmmakers have also shown perfect taste in choosing traditional and mid-twentieth century songs: "The Heart You Break May Be Your Own" (performed by Patsy Cline), "White Lightning" (George Jones), "Tennessee Waltz" (Patty Page), "I'll Never Get out of the World Alive" (Hank Williams), and "Can't Feel at Home" (The Carter Family). These songs reinforce the message of the film and add to its atmosphere.

What all the characters (good, seemingly good, and downright bad) have in common in the brickfilm are their oversized hands, which are tools for holding, grasping, doing, and connecting. In the movie, these hands perform everyday activities (such as holding a newspaper, washing dishes, or driving a car). But gestures also accompany speech acts (often painful): the grandchildren's denunciation of the grandmother, the grandmother's manipulation, or Bailey's anger. Interestingly, what appears to be a limitation of a LEGO minifigure helps underscore the message of O'Connor's story, which is about touching each other's lives. When the grandmother tries to connect and literally touch the Misfit, he shoots her. Reddish blots splatter the screen, suggesting that even in a world made of plastic, touching someone matters and it is possible to bleed.

Adaptations of American short stories give the Silleck Family Productions an educational dimension that is appreciated by viewers, as numerous comments show. Young students who despair of facing the text, rejoice at a more palatable, though faithful version. For example, a student writes: "I was dreading doing the reading for my lit class... and then I found this gem. I need more of these" (»@mgncppa«). Teachers also show gratitude, for example: "Thank you so much for this! Better than any live-action adaptation could hope to be. My 9th-grade class loved it!" (»@user-tz3fv3er3j«). A student who needs to know O'Connor's story for a class in literature will rejoice at this synopsis that builds upon a childhood pastime but is not childish at all. Beyond educational purposes, the viewers, however, will take away only what they are prepared to see: the pink suitcase, the chained monkey, or the plasticity of good and evil.

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