

Topical Films: Room and The LEGO Movie

Here are two films that explore the idea of freedom.

Room came out in 2015. It is Certificate 15 and deals with some dark subject matter. Five-year-old Jack lives with his mother, Ma, confined in a small room by a man who holds them captive. Ma tries to focus on the room as a world for the boy, not a place of confinement.

The LEGO Movie (2014) is much lighter and more fun, but deals with important questions about freedom, conformity, cooperation, community and sacrifice.

Below are some key questions to consider. Watch the film and try to answer the questions. On the next two pages you will find fascinating extra information and thoughtful reflections to help you think about these questions further. Read the pages and edit your answers in light of any new thoughts that you have.

A film blog... start here!

You may not be keen to write a load of essays, but how about starting a blog, talking about films you have watched, and commenting on the religious and philosophical questions that they raise?

Here are some questions to get you started when watching *Room* or *The LEGO Movie*:

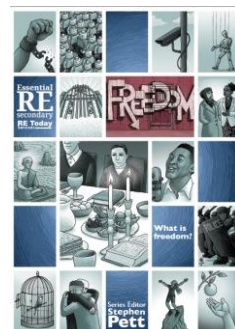
- Hamlet says, 'I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space'. Do you think Ma and Jack would agree?
- What holds us captive, and where can we find freedom?
- How free are we, when we follow the trends of social media?
- Would a land with no rules be a place of true freedom?

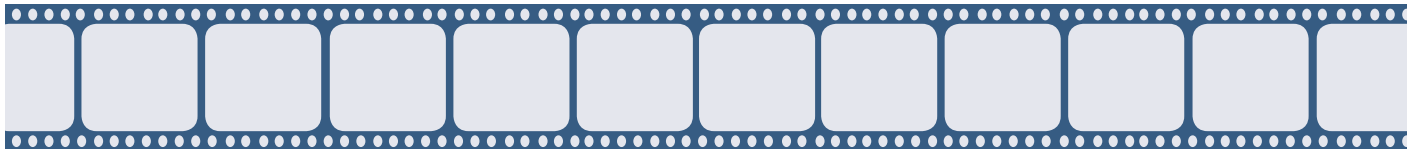
What other questions do you have? What other questions do these films raise for you?

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Essential RE: Freedom

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Topical film:

using films about freedom



Freedom is a common theme in film. Think of James Bond's endless efforts to protect the world from the maniacal desires of various political or criminal masterminds who impose their will on the innocent masses. Or the psychological freedom offered to Riley in *Inside Out* – realising that all of her emotions are important (a message, perhaps, against the contemporary tyranny of happiness?).

Many films depict wrongful imprisonment, from the fictional classic *Shawshank Redemption* to the dark reality of *In the Name of the Father* or *Cry Freedom*, about the death in custody of anti-apartheid campaigner, Steve Biko. The removal of freedom and rights by those in power is an experience that people have faced throughout human history. Despite the high ideals of many religions, religious power also reveals the truth of the claim that power corrupts (think of the inquisition depicted in the fictional film *The Name of the Rose*, the appalling treatment of 'fallen women' in *Magdalene Sisters*, or the horrific abuse scandal revealed in *Spotlight*).

Religious ideals can be set against failures of individuals who share that religion, such as in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, which Hugo claims shows a journey from evil to good and from hell to heaven, overcoming the degradation of humanity by poverty. It is a journey where freedom, based on Christian forgiveness and a desire for social justice, comes up against the pitiless workings of the law in a Christian country populated by Christian lawyers, politicians and employers. This story shows both the power of religious ideals and the reality of failure to live up to those ideals.

Freedom is not always achieved and the ending isn't always happy of course; think of *Spartacus*, with its noble but doomed rebellion of slaves against the might and fears of Imperial Rome. Despite this crushing defeat the hope of, and fight for, freedom is powerfully conveyed.

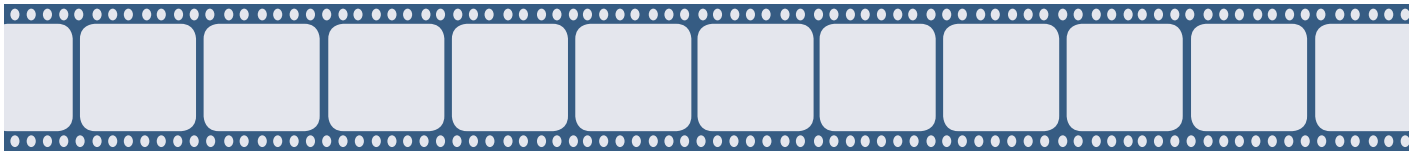
Films based on historical reality remind us that individual conscience is central to the drive for liberty. Think of *Lincoln*, where Lincoln's desire for freedom of speech and a free society empower those who were struggling against slavery. In this case power was used for good, driven by individual conscience and an inspired community.

Science fiction recognises the importance of the theme: *The Hunger Games* series assures audiences that even under the most dystopian tyranny, the human urge for freedom and dignity is unquenchable.



Room

In this 2015 film based on Emma Donoghue's book of the same name, five-year-old Jack lives with his mother, Ma, in a room, ten feet square. Abducted seven years previously, and with Jack the result of her captor's sexual abuse, Ma seeks to protect her son from the horrors of their confinement by making 'Room' a world for the boy. Instead of focusing on the limitations of their confinement, Ma helps Jack to see a world from within it. As with Hamlet, who 'could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not I have bad dreams', Ma tries to keep the bad dreams from confining her son, so that external imprisonment does not ruin his internal freedom. She calls her captor 'Old Nick', a term which reminds her of the evil of his abuse without drawing Jack's attention to it. (It is Milton's 'Old Nick', the rather Byronic Satan, who says 'The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven'. Ma's creative and courageous care of her son makes his world more heaven than hell, while resisting and absorbing the banal but hellish cruelty of her captor for herself.)



[Spoiler alert!] The two do not remain confined within the room for the whole film. As in the escape from Plato's Cave, there is a struggle to adjust from one reality to another. Their physical freedom introduces Jack to a whole new range of fears, from which Ma cannot protect him: the brightness and physical space; the intrusion of outsiders, whether press or police or medical staff; the complexity of family relationships, where the unconditional love of Ma for Jack is not so freely offered. Despite its dismal premise, the film is a hopeful one – about courage, love and the enduring desire for freedom.



The LEGO Movie

Out of the darkness into the light! One of the surprise hits of 2014 and widely hailed as a classic animated film, *The LEGO Movie* is not only for those who have trodden on LEGO bricks in bare feet, or found LEGO characters stuffed down the back of the sofa. It's also a riot of movement, smart one-liners and film character and plot references, with the most annoyingly catchy title song.

Emmet Brickowski is the Everyman character, happily locked into conformity in a world run by President Business, whose company, Octan, makes all kinds of cool stuff: music, dairy products, coffee, TV shows, surveillance systems, all history books, voting machines ... The freedom people had previously to travel and build whatever they wanted has been restricted by President Business, who has constructed walls between the worlds and become obsessed with order and perfection. He is planning to unleash the mysterious secret super weapon called the Kragle in just three days, to keep everything just as it is, permanently.

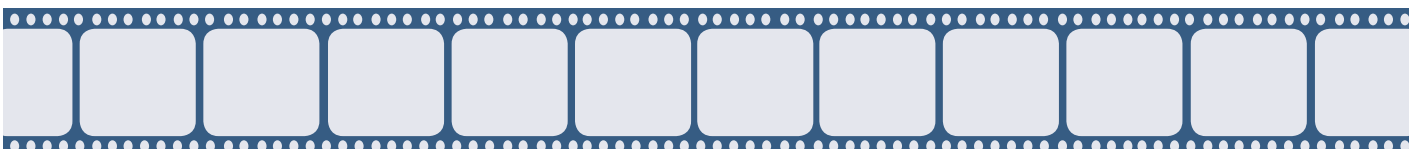
Emmet unwittingly becomes identified as the mysterious Special One who will be a Master Builder and use the 'Piece of Resistance' to overthrow President Business's regime, according to a prophecy. Rescued by the intriguing WildStyle (who has a boyfriend, and it's super-serious), Emmet encounters Superman, Batman, Dumbledore, Gandalf and other Master Builders – and teaches them that they need to be able to work as a team if they want to defeat Lord Business.

The film critiques a world where everyone is dulled into conformity – but where they think their uniformity is freedom. Everyone watches the same programme, laughs at the same joke, likes the same music, happily pays exorbitant prices for coffee (because everything is 'awesome'). In students' lives, social media might make more information available to you but do you often spend your time sharing the same memes and video clips..? There is some irony in the call for freedom and creativity in the film: many teachers recall the old-fashioned LEGO bricks where you could create anything, compared with modern kits where parts are there only to make specific models, however marvellous, and by following instructions.

The film might suggest that you don't have to be a superhero to make a difference, and that creative cooperation is liberating and can stand up against the might of multinational corporations (or an authoritarian state). There is a witty treatment of the idea that a land with no rules is a land of freedom (where there is no government, no bedtimes, no bushy moustaches, and no negativity of any kind); where any idea is a good idea except the 'not-happy' ones. We might think that we are free in a liberal, secular culture, but it imposes its own rules and expectations, and treats transgressors harshly.

At the heart of the story there is the willingness of Emmet to sacrifice himself to free his friends. This is a central theme in many stories, emphasised within religious worldviews and explored in the non-religious explanations of the evolutionary advantages of altruism. It suggests that, perhaps, there is something about being prepared to look to the needs of others that is at the heart of being human and that, paradoxically, freedom is less about getting what we want and more about getting what others need.

As the film's prophet Vitruvius says, 'I know that sounds like a cat poster, but it's true.'



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