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Sincerely Celebrating Failure: Tommy Wiseau's *The Room* and the Search for Sincerity

Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between Tommy Wiseau's cult sensation *The Room* and its fans by exploring the fans' active impulse to construct *The Room* as a failed film in order to allow for a hybrid form of ironic and sincere reception. The first part of this paper examines how *The Room* does not conform to traditional discourses surrounding cult films and how many fans of *The Room* work to construct the film as a failure, even as Wiseau insists that every aspect of the film is intentional. The second part of the paper examines exactly why some fans do this work and how they are able to transform public screenings of *The Room* into spaces in which audiences can safely try out different ways of relating to the world by combining postmodern irony with what has popularly been called the New Sincerity.

Opening in Los Angeles in 2003 to little fanfare and scathing reviews, director/writer/actor/producer Tommy Wiseau's magnum opus *The Room*—commonly referred to as “the *Citizen Kane* of bad movies”¹—now plays to sold-out audiences throughout North America and Europe. Telling the simple tale of its protagonist Johnny's (Wiseau) betrayal at the hands of his girlfriend Lisa (Juliette Danielle) and best friend Mark (Greg Sestero), *The Room* continues to attract moviegoers who come to yell at the screen and revel in the shortcomings of its script, acting, and cinematography. Still, even though the film has been running for over seven years, to call *The Room* an unprecedented success would be to miss the point of its popularity. Against all of Wiseau's attempts to argue otherwise,² fans of the film actively work to construct *The Room* as a failed film and Wiseau as a failed filmmaker in order to enable a mode of reception grounded in sincere enjoyment that resists a purely ironic appreciation of the film. Indeed, the majority of debates surrounding *The Room* seem to stand in for a larger cultural battle between postmodern irony

and what radio host Jesse Thorn has called “The New Sincerity,”³ and public screenings of the film serve as the field on which this battle is fought. In fact, I will argue that these screenings can offer safe spaces for audiences to relate to the world from within both paradigms in ways that potentially challenge the stability of the success/failure binary altogether.

A Comedy with the Passion of Tennessee Williams: Classifying *The Room*

Upon its initial release, *The Room* was marketed strictly as a drama, with posters and trailers claiming that it expressed “the passion of Tennessee Williams.” In response to audiences' laughter and ridicule, however, Wiseau began insisting that he intended for the film to be a “quirky black comedy.”⁴ When questioned about his decision to rebrand *The Room*, Wiseau explained, “I don't [just] call it black comedy; it *is* black comedy . . . everything was done intentionally.”⁵ Many audiences, especially the fans who would view the film again and again, could



Tommy Wiseau: sincere American naïf or comic genius?

not accept this explanation. Since audiences laugh at the film's overall ineptitude as a film, rather than at any jokes it may contain, receiving *The Room* as an intentional comedy or as a metacinematic parody of "bad" movies would actually remove all of the comedic value from the film. As a proactive response to Wiseau's continued insistence that he intended for his film to be funny, some audiences began looking outside the text for evidence that would call Wiseau's revisionism into question.

The ongoing dispute over *The Room's* generic classification speaks to academic discourses of fan practice that treat texts as raw, unfinished materials to be manipulated and reimagined. These discourses shift focus away from the properties of the text or the intentions of its producers and onto the strategies readers use to derive meaning from the texts.⁶ Elaborating on this point in terms of genre, Mark Jancovich agrees with scholars like Henry Jenkins and Jason Mittell that generic definitions are based on collective agreements between different interpretive communities, but he also argues that challenging the generic stability that cultural producers sometimes try to impose does not mean that there will be consensus about a film's genre or widespread acceptance of generic indeterminacy.⁷ Even when the features of the text are set aside, genre remains permanently in flux and is constantly policed by different audiences with different stakes and motivations.

In fact, questions of genre can fundamentally alter the enjoyment of the text, and disagreements over generic categorization can actually displace larger debates surrounding issues of intentionality and authorship. When it comes to *The Room*, the terms "black comedy" and "drama," as well as any conventions associated with them, are, in and of themselves, meaningless; but they still mark an

important difference as to how the film is received. If audiences take Wiseau at his word that *The Room* is a black comedy, they implicitly agree that the film's failings are not failings at all, but are instead the successful realization of Wiseau's vision.⁸ On the other hand, if they receive the film as an attempted melodrama, they allow themselves to indulge in a bad object and extract new, and arguably more satisfying, pleasures from the film. In this way, *The Room* complicates existing reception-based approaches to genre. Whereas genre is often theorized as an effect of reception, the case of *The Room* shows that, oftentimes, the perception of generic stability is a precondition for certain modes of reception. If *The Room* is to be enjoyed, audiences must believe that the humor emerges from the text's failings, not that it is built into the text.

Unfortunately, because Wiseau is actively involved with the film's promotion and continues to insist that *The Room* is an intentional comedy, examining the text alone can only end in a stalemate with Wiseau. As such, fans are forced to look to the circumstances surrounding the film's production and circulation for meaning and use extra-textual evidence to build a case for the film as a failed "drama" in order to inflect every textual detail with intention and sincerity. Only by doing this work can some audiences fend off Wiseau's competing claims and create an interpretation of *The Room* that allows it to be enjoyed as a sincere, unintentional, failed film.

Tearing Tommy Apart: Wiseau as Contested Star and Failed Author

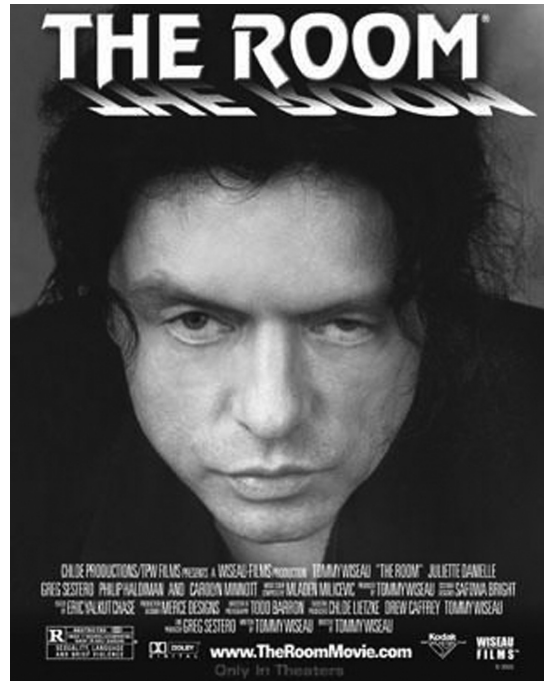
Perhaps unsurprisingly, many fans begin this work by trying to construct Wiseau as an author who is genuine (and inept) enough to have made *The Room*. By scouring the countless interviews and Q&A sessions with Wiseau, fans hope to see Wiseau trip up and reveal his actual self. Yet all that remains consistent about Wiseau's responses is their very inconsistency.⁹ Of course, it may be impossible to deduce definitively whether Wiseau's self-presentation is intentional. But what is especially interesting is how the doubletalk and linguistic slippages that define Wiseau's interviews cannot be attributed to him being caught off guard

SINCERELY CELEBRATING FAILURE

or to coincidence, as even the promotional images he controls are highly imperfect.

The self-produced interview that comes packaged with the DVD version of *The Room* serves as an excellent case in point. Meant to answer frequently asked questions about *The Room*, the interview actually serves to complicate matters. For example, Wiseau responds to negative critiques of *The Room* by arguing that those who only see incompetent filmmaking do not understand his film, since “everything was done meticulously with meticulous planning and with a lot of preparation . . . the entire project was not an accident.” Curiously, the last half of that very sentence was clearly dubbed in post-production, creating an imperfection that makes it difficult to take Wiseau at his word. This apparent marker of the instability that permeates the “real” Wiseau allows fans to return to the text and identify the naïveté and the sincerity they desire within Wiseau’s performance as Johnny.

If *The Room* makes one thing clear, it is that Johnny is the perfect man. Friends trust him to give advice; he pays for his orphaned neighbor’s tuition; and he cannot even leave the local flower shop without the vendor telling him that he is her favorite customer. As portrayed by Wiseau, however, Johnny is a mess, and there is a definite disconnect between how Johnny acts and is received by characters within the film’s diegesis and how he is acted by Wiseau and received by the audience. In his attempt to carry the cool confidence needed to portray the character, Wiseau cannot help but stumble over his lines and make facial gestures that are incongruous with the emotion Johnny is supposed to be feeling. As hard as he tries to portray his idea of a perfect man, Wiseau fails at every turn, and it is precisely this apparent obliviousness to his own failure as an actor that endears him to audiences. Indeed, Wiseau’s stardom is predicated on the fact that the quirks and imperfections that seep into the performance must be interpreted as indicative of the “real” Wiseau on display in all of his authentic glory. Only by bringing their knowledge of the extra-textual Wiseau to bear on the film can viewers rest assured that Wiseau is indeed an incompetent actor and not a comic genius ironically and intentionally portraying the idea of the perfect man.¹⁰



The official promotional poster for *The Room*.



Johnny and Lisa comfort Denny after Johnny saves him from the violent drug dealer Chris-R.

This obsession with identifying the “real” Wiseau ties into the single element of Wiseau’s self-presentation that stands out most: his constant insistence that, despite his thick accent, he is an American living the American Dream.¹¹ In this way, Wiseau, intentionally or not, aligns himself with longstanding cultural myths and transforms himself from an inept wannabe filmmaker into the quintessential American naïf. By shifting the terms of the discourse away from the quality of the film and onto the fact that it was completed at all, Wiseau was able to win praise and fend off serious criticism. Admits one critic, “It’s my own secret dream (as it is most critics’) to make a film of my

own, and since I don't have the courage or means to pursue such a dream and I consciously know this, I can't help but feel bad bashing the product of someone who managed to pursue it himself."¹² Others, like fan Dan MacRae, are less reluctant in their praise. Says MacRae, "Tommy Wiseau *is* America. . . . Deep down, in our most confused and humbling and vulnerable moments, isn't there a Tommy Wiseau in all of us?"¹³

"You Can Laugh, You Can Cry, You Can Express Yourself": *The Room* as Fortress of New Sincerity

Because enjoyment of *The Room* demands much from its audience, the real question is not about how Wiseau's fans engage with the film, but why. Much of the academic discourse surrounding cult or "trash" cinema is caught up in issues of aesthetic or political resistance on the part of filmmakers or spectators. While the contributions by scholars such as Joan Hawkins, Jeffrey Sconce, and Greg Taylor are productive in many cases, they tend to merely flip the success/failure binary rather than dealing with failed films on their own terms, as failures (the phrase "it's so bad, it's good" operates similarly).¹⁴ Such arguments cannot account for the popularity of *The Room*. Fans never position Wiseau as an iconoclast and never see his film as an affront to mainstream Hollywood. For fans of *The Room*, the film's imperfections are themselves reason enough to enjoy the film. This, I would argue, is indicative of a mode of reception that is not actually predicated on distancing but rather on genuine enjoyment.

One potentially useful way of looking at the reception of *The Room*, then, is through the competing cultural paradigms of irony and sincerity. In an essay on what he calls the "new American 'smart' film," Sconce argues that irony has become a dominant cinematic sensibility. Existing between the art house and the multiplex, these films define themselves in opposition to mainstream Hollywood by adopting classical narrative strategies but changing the tone in ways that critique bourgeois culture.¹⁵ The result is a group of films that display "dispassion, disengagement, and disinterest" and split their audiences into those that "get it" and those that do not.¹⁶ Importantly, Sconce notes that when

"smart" audiences do consume mass culture, they do so only "in quotation marks."¹⁷ Russell Peterson similarly, albeit more cynically, describes 21st Century culture as building an impotent, apolitical "Fortress of Irony," in which "every communication is enclosed in air quotes . . . sincerity is suspect, commitment is lame, and believing in stuff is for suckers."¹⁸ While Peterson's claims are arguably over-exaggerated, he is not alone in advocating for a cultural shift toward a more sincere relationship with political and cultural institutions.

Although a formulation of sincerity as an engaged mode of cultural interaction has not been sufficiently theorized, it has been gaining some currency in popular discourse ever since *Time's* Roger Rosenblatt predicted that the events of September 11, 2001, would spell the end of irony.¹⁹ Although some would admit that Rosenblatt's proclamation was premature,²⁰ for Jesse Thorn, host of *The Sound of Young America*, irony as a cultural paradigm is slowly being replaced by a hybrid form of irony and sincerity that celebrates "being larger than life and the acknowledgment that the coolest stuff comes from being completely unafraid of being seen as uncool."²¹ As noted in Thorn's "A Manifesto for the New Sincerity," the New Sincerity is more of a reconsideration of irony than a rejection of it. It is about sincerely appreciating things that are too over-the-top to be taken literally.²² In short, the New Sincerity is concerned with rethinking evaluative language and challenging the traditional meanings of success and failure altogether.

To return to *The Room*, it seems that all of the public discourse surrounding the film is actually concerned with navigating the space between sincerity and irony and the ways in which the film allows audiences to try out both responses at once. On the one hand, fan appreciation of *The Room* is totally ironic, and public screenings are replete with catcalls ridiculing the film's imperfections. Still, during these screenings, there are points when ironic consumption seems to give way to moments of earnest appreciation. It is common, for instance, for fans to shush the rest of the theater in preparation for Johnny's observation that "If everybody loved each other, the world would be a better place." Instead of responding to this moment of sincerity with howling laughter,

SINCERELY CELEBRATING FAILURE



“You are tearing me apart, Lisa!” Irony and sincerity collide whenever Wiseau performs his most famous line.

many audiences burst into applause or break out into chants of “Yes We Can,” which, as the A.V. Club so succinctly puts it, is “one of those rare moments when irony and sincerity collide, neither quite dominating the other.”²³ Fans of *The Room* express similar sentiments, with James MacDowell saying it best: “I can honestly say that I deeply love this movie in no less a sense than I deeply love, say, *Vertigo*.” Importantly, MacDowell clarifies that he thinks the movie is bad, but “bad” in very special and very strange ways.”²⁴

The Room, it seems, creates the inverse of Sconce’s bifurcated “smart” audience. In this case, those who do not “get it” are those who treat the film purely ironically and refuse to express any sincere enjoyment. If a viewer asks a rude or ironic question during a Q&A session with Wiseau, for example, the audience will often boo and berate said viewer, making him very aware that his ironic comments are not welcome.²⁵ *The Room*, in effect, oscillates between a Fortress of Irony and a Fortress of Sincerity. Even if audience reception is marked in part by continued ironic distance, fan response suggests a simultaneous proximity to earnest moments in the film and to Wiseau himself.

Still, even if the theater space oscillates between a Fortress of Irony and a Fortress of Sincerity, the audience ultimately remains inside a fortress. A shift from cynicism to optimism and from snark to sincerity has the same net political effect if both involve inaction. At the same time, however, to say that the New Sincerity is always apolitical is as overly simplistic as claiming that it is irony’s more politicized inverse. Fan engagement with *The Room* might also be valuable as a process of negotiating

and working through the contradictions between irony and sincerity even if it does not create tangible social change. Here, it is useful to remember that *The Room*, even when enjoyed “sincerely,” is still acknowledged as a failed film and that even its fans are unable to commit to the film on purely experiential terms without employing traditional evaluative paradigms of “success” and “failure” to qualify their sincere enjoyment.

To sincerely enjoy *The Room* is not to transform the film or its creator into successes but to challenge the continued value of success and failure as analytic terms even as one is confined within them; it is to demonstrate a nostalgic appreciation for the American naïf even as one feels compelled to critique and ridicule him for his inability to conform to accepted definitions of success. Perhaps, then, the doubled, conflicted responses that accompany screenings of *The Room* point to a defining social paradox in which remaining ironically distanced is akin to a refusal to act, but getting too close, as exemplified by sincerity, forces viewers to confront the possibility of failure. By acknowledging their experiential enjoyment of the film, audiences align themselves with Wiseau in an unwinnable affront to the success/failure evaluative binary without the protection of the distanced, ironic stance. Sincere viewers are vulnerable viewers, but they are also engaged viewers who are willing, if only for a moment, to uphold traditional American ideology no matter how frail, unstable, and mythical it may be.

When asked to describe the meaning of the film’s eponymous room, Wiseau has stated that, “The room is a place you can go to have a good time, bad time, it’s a safe place [sic].”²⁶ This explanation could apply equally to how the film functions socially, as *The Room* serves as a space in which audiences can safely relate to the world both ironically and sincerely. In the end, however, this process always refers to its own futility. While *The Room* does offer a safe space in which to confront and negotiate social contradictions, it is still an isolated space and one in which the only options are ironic distance or a likely encounter with failure. Maybe this is why audiences need to claim Wiseau as a sincere filmmaker. By legitimately and genuinely celebrating Wiseau’s failure on its own terms, some audiences partially

disavow the broader implications of failure itself. As audiences collectively empathize and identify with Wiseau's failure, they can do nothing but sincerely uphold Wiseau as an ego-ideal—if only for a brief moment. To treat him and his project with complete irony would not only signal the acknowledgement of failure, but also the acceptance of it.

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End Notes

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- 2 See, for example, the interview with Wiseau included on the DVD of *The Room*.
- 3 While Thorn's definition of the New Sincerity is most applicable to *The Room*, the phrase was first employed in film studies in Jim Collins, "Genericity in the Nineties: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity," in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, ed. Jim Collins and Hillary Radner (New York: Routledge, 1993), 242-265.
- 4 Curiously, the film's official trailer (<http://www.theroommovie.com/roomtrailer.html>) allows both meanings to coexist even as Wiseau himself tries to emphasize the "intentionally" comedic elements.
- 5 "Interview with Tommy Wiseau," *Mahalo Daily*, Episode 19, December 2007, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FRN9FpMkUbU> (accessed 3 August, 2001).
- 6 See, for instance, Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* (New York: Routledge, 1992) and Jason Mittell, "Audiences Talking Genre," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 31, no. 1 (2003), 36-46.
- 7 Mark Jancovich, "A Real Shocker: Authenticity, Genre and the Struggle for Distinction," *Continuum* 14, no. 1 (April 2000), 23.
- 8 Debates surrounding intentionality are a staple of online fan discourse. See, for example, "Re: Tommy Wieau's The Room," *Collative Learning*, 18 December, 2010, http://www.collativelearning.com/mybb_1401/Upload/showthread.php?tid=493&pid=4617#pid4617 (accessed 4 August, 2011).
- 9 As one example among dozens, see Paul Terefenko, "Interview: Tommy Wiseau," *Now* (Toronto), 24 July 2009, <http://www.nowtoronto.com/daily/movies/story.cfm?content=170564> (accessed 4 August 2011).
- 10 This particular debate only intensified with the release of *The House That Drips Blood on Alex* (Brock LaBorde and Jared Richard, 2010). Many fans dismissed this televised short comedy, starring Wiseau, as overly self-aware and unfunny. See, for example, Deuce, "Reader Comments," *I Watch Stuff*, 15 October, 2010, http://www.iwatchstuff.com/2010/10/tommy_wiseau_and_cheaters_in_t.php (accessed 4 August, 2011).
- 11 Terefenko, *Ibid.*
- 12 "The Room," *Late to the Theater*, 8 July, 2010, <http://latetothetheater.wordpress.com/2010/07/18/jesus-christ-bananas-entry-tommy-wiseaus-the-room/> (accessed 4 August, 2011).
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- 15 Jeffrey Sconce, "Irony, Nihilism and the New American 'Smart' Film," *Screen* 43, no. 4 (2002), 352.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 359.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 356.
- 18 Russell Peterson, *Strange Bedfellows: How Late-Night Comedy Turns Democracy into a Joke* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 2008), 18.
- 19 Roger Rosenblatt, "The Age of Irony Comes to an End," *Time*, 16 September, 2001.
- 20 See, for example, Michiko Kakutani, "The Age of Irony Isn't Over After All," *New York Times*, 9 October, 2001, E1.
- 21 Jesse Thorn, "A Manifesto for the New Sincerity," *Maximum Fun*, 26 March, 2006, <http://www.maximumfun.org/blog/2006/02/manifesto-for-new-sincerity.html> (accessed 4 August, 2011).
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 House of Qwesi, "A Viewer's Guide to *The Room*," *The A.V. Club*, 11 March, 2009, <http://www.avclub.com/articles/a-viewers-guide-to-the-room,25721/> (accessed 4 August, 2011).

SINCERELY CELEBRATING FAILURE

24 James MacDowell, "On the Greatness of Tommy Wiseau's *The Room*," *The Lesser Feat*, 17 August, 2010, <http://thelesserfeat.blogspot.com/2010/08/on-greatness-of-tommy-wiseaus-room.html> (accessed 4 August, 2011).

25 See, for example, "The Tommy Wiseau Interview," *YouTube*, 16 July, 2010, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qvcVIS2WRFk&feature=related> (accessed 4 August, 2011).

26 "An interview with Tommy Wiseau," *The Room*, DVD, 2005.