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In Defense of 'The Room': Atmosphere and Tone



"Evil Man" promotional image featuring Tommy Wiseau

Once the Author is gone, the claim to “decipher” a text becomes quite useless. To give an Author to a text is to impose upon that text a stop clause, to furnish it with a final signification, to close the writing.

– Roland Barthes, “*The Death of the Author*” (1967)

The Room, written, directed, and starring filmmaker-actor Tommy Wiseau is infamously awful. It has become a recurring Adult Swim April Fool’s joke. It’s the film that finally beat out *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1959) and *Troll 2* (1990) from the top slot of, for lack of a better term, “the *Citizen Kane* of bad movies.” And it will forever remain a midnight movie cult classic legend.

The Room’s amateur acting and haphazard writing and directing, coupled



dollar vanity project into a memorable, wild experience. LITERATURE ARTS WRITING

The Room could easily be described by the age-old critique “it’s so bad it’s good,” which *The Room* certainly is, but this explanation of the film is not entirely useful. *The Room* is far more complex than that, and despite Wiseau’s sporadic direction, the film achieves an unprecedented level of emergent atmosphere and tone. While Wiseau famously cited Tennessee Williams as inspiration, *The Room*, the film subtracted of its director, is something wholly original and horrifying. Wiseau’s initial intentions are no longer relevant.

A bit of a preface: my first experience with the film was during one of the Adult Swim April Fool’s airings a few years ago. I was aware of *The Room*, and had seen the “Evil Man” promo image on the internet, but disregarded it as some kind of horror film.

Drifting in and out of a drowsy stupor, I watched the late-night nightmare unfold, Adult Swim’s tongue-in-cheek humor lost on me. The film’s relentless lack of consistent characters and plotting, its complete disregard for reality, its repetitive, creepy sex scenes, the general lack of moral storytelling, the existence of the character Johnny (his elusive voice, his piercing face), and the film’s absurd contortion of, I guess, Tennessee Williams-style drama leads *The Room* to be one of the most uncomfortable film experiences in the history of cinema. And that *soundtrack...*





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ANIME MANGA

COMICS

GAMES

LITERATURE ART

WRITING



Lisa shows off her new dress to Johnny and Denny

The film left a morbid taste in my mouth, and it was not until subsequent viewings (one of which was in a screenwriting program – the students were shown how to *not* write a scene) that I grew fond of the film’s emergent humor and obsessed with the mysterious and possibly magical Tommy Wiseau.

Still, the disturbing nuances of the film remained in my mind, and the film’s volatile, distressing tone continued to intrigue and haunt me. How could a film so awful have such a unique, overpowering atmosphere? Unlike *Plan 9*, which is pure camp, *The Room* is overbearing and incomparably uncomfortable.

Even during its silliest scenes, the film manages to capture a certain weary soullessness. Wiseau attempts to construct a Tennessee Williams epic, but instead highlights something terrible and immoral about the human drama: the world in *The Room* is joyless, essentially lifeless, and isolating.

The Room opens with a montage of alien, post-modern establishing shots of San Francisco, offering little useful context. The film’s theme, aptly named “The Room,” composed for the film by Mladen Milicevic, is an eerie, lingering track, playful and weirdly mournful. It is the sound of inexplicable perverted turmoil, and while it is not exactly evocative of, brings

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In the ensuing scenes, the audience meets Johnny, Wiseau's character, and visits his home, an unreal, poorly lit garage (?) of a house, complete with blood red walls and senseless decoration. Johnny's indescribable "foreign" accent, his black outfit, and long, disheveled hair give him an otherworldly presence. His bizarre, inhuman dialogue (which is so poorly dubbed), coupled with his and Lisa's (Juliette Danielle) lack of chemistry from the very start of the film begin to highlight (here, unintentionally) the theme of the toxicity of any and all human interaction.



Denny asks Lisa if Johnny is home. He's not.

Denny (or Danny), a teenager from next door, enters unannounced just as Lisa tries on the red dress Johnny bought her ("I would do anything for my girl."). Denny is like a son to Johnny, and the details of his past and present are consistently shrouded in mystery. One can assume that Denny's character's purpose is to showcase Johnny's charity and goodness, as Johnny is paying for his schooling, but rather, the character, as he comes and goes, only accentuates the world's lack of stability.



throughout the over-three minute scene, complete with an excess of candles and rose petals. The scene is less a sex scene than an abstraction of a sex scene, holding all the pieces but failing to put them together in any meaningful way. The morning after begins with Johnny's pale naked rear, a variation of the creepy theme, and a candelabra of red candles hovering over Lisa's body. While the text reads romance, the scene actually reads macabre and almost gothic. Disaster and fatality hang in the air regardless of whatever is happening in the plot. The lifeless sex scenes continue, with another ten minutes later, and yet another around the half hour mark.

The next highlight in the film comes seconds later as Lisa's mother (Carolyn Minnott) enters the living room (assumedly the “room” the film is named after). In another strangely lit scene with ample amounts of red and black, Lisa admits to her mother that she no longer loves Johnny. Lisa's mother tells her she has to marry Johnny, for the money, and then exits within sixty seconds.

One of the critiques against *The Room* is its failure to hold a scene for any substantial amount of time, and that its transitions are too awkward and upfront. The scene with Lisa's mother is just the first of several scenes where a character jarringly enters and leaves for no apparent reason other than to advance the “plot.” Characters are in a hurry, but for nothing in particular.

In one scene, Denny stops in to see Johnny, who is not home. Lisa, who is “busy,” offers to let Denny stay and wait, but Denny then claims he is busy and must leave. Meanwhile, Denny also playfully obsesses over Lisa's beauty, further making the scene feel disjointed and discordant. The writing



Lisa, his forced grin sends awkward chills up the viewer's spine.

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These quick, motionless scenes are absurd, in an almost Beckett way, yet *The Room*, unlike *Godot*, is striving for realism. As the characters rush around, failing to make connections, they become less and less real. Most human interaction in the film, especially with Johnny, is reduced to a series of catchphrases.

Later, Lisa makes a phone call to Mark (Greg Sestero), who claims he is very busy (twice) but seems to just be waiting in his car wearing sunglasses doing nothing. Lisa seeks to cheat on Johnny by seducing Mark, Johnny's best friend, which is the major plot of the film, for no real reason other than the fact that she "no longer loves him." Throughout, she attempts to turn people against Johnny, framing him for drunkenly attacking her (which never happens), despite his unsubtle adoration for her ("...and I love Lisa so much.").

Mark's character is just as mysterious and inexplicable as the rest of the cast. With every scene, his view of his relationship with Lisa shifts, from sometimes defending Johnny to sometimes trying to hurt him on purpose. Lisa and Mark's relationship, and especially Lisa's hatred of Johnny, is as absurd as it is genuinely upsetting and uncomfortable. If Wiseau sought to make her a truly and archetypically evil character, he succeeded, despite how flat and unreal she may be.





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ANIME

MANGA

COMICS

GAMES

LITERATURE

AR

WRITING



Lisa tricks Johnny into drinking alcohol

In yet another scene, Johnny comes home to reveal he did not receive a promotion. Lisa, fresh from cheating with Mark, is kind to Johnny, and even orders him a pizza. Johnny's despair is difficult to read due to Wiseau's acting (he laughs with inappropriate lines of dialogue), and Lisa's inconsistency confuses the issue. The two drink, of course over the film's eerie theme, and the scene has a sense of real decadence and sin that audience members must look away from. Full of dull reds and blacks, the drinking scene continues the film's inadvertent gothic overtone, and Johnny's dialogue continues the film's upsetting lack of realism ("I'm tired. I'm wasted. I love you darling!").

Lisa struggles to convince the boozed Johnny to make love to her, but does, and the sex footage seems to be exactly lifted from the first sex scene from earlier in the film. Lisa's personality ambiguities emphasize her sociopathy. In the next scene, between Lisa and her mother, Lisa begins the conversation by inviting her mother to a party Lisa is throwing for Johnny, then, without warning, claims she hates Johnny and that he abuses her.

Among the central plot are a dizzying amount of subplots, zero of which have a conclusion or specific use in terms of character or world development. Lisa's mother's breast cancer and estate issues, Mike and Michelle's nonsensical porn romance (that occurs in Johnny's home

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introduced, failing to further the plot or verisimilitude. These short segments almost attain a slice of life quality, but are too absurd and fall short, becoming minutiae.



Peter hurts himself while playing football

In one of the most infamous scenes in the film, Johnny, Denny, Mark, and their friend Peter play football in tuxedos. The scene goes to great lengths to avoid advancing the plot or character development and ends with Peter falling and hurting himself. In a previous scene, Mike also hurts himself during a game of catch. These scenes are senseless, but also dangerous, and while trying to be light, and maybe even humorous, only add to the layers of meaninglessness of the film's text.

Each scene in *The Room* is comic, melodramatic, but also macabre and abstract, so that they cannot be read easily.

Audiences roll in the aisles with laughter at the emergent humor, at how awful they deem the film, but these elusive qualities, the gothic tones, the



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Wiseau's *The Room* is a film about the absence of love, but, inadvertently, it is a film about the absence of life. With so many scenes and characters with their own subplots, the film somehow avoids any real human contact or emotion. The film would work as a post-modern, cynical text along the lines of *American Psycho* or *Gerald's Party*, works of art that can be explained and understood, ones that have theme and aesthetics, but Wiseau's prevailing sense of weirdness clouds out any real understanding or meaning.

While the film is obviously hilarious, its dark ending is somewhat moody considering how melodramatic it is. The violence comes to a climax, and for once in the film, characters act like humans with real emotions. With shock and desperation, the surviving characters struggle to comprehend their emotions and actions, but the time to be human has passed. It's too late. Through tragedy, the characters are thrust into the real world, albeit a highly stylized one, momentarily, and find it unbearable.



Johnny feels betrayed



eyes at the melodrama. Wiseau's climax is supposed to deliver a shock, and it does, but not quite for the reasons he seems to have wanted.

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There is a slight irony in the fact that both the popular reading of *The Room* (awful and hilarious) and this defense of it (inhuman and unstable) completely disregard and circumnavigate Wiseau's original vision of a classic American family drama. As per Barthes, one can read any text as he sees fit, without the context and intentions of the author. The "death of the author" is a wholly post-structuralist and post-modern idea, and through this lens, new life can emerge from the text. Is this critique useful? Is it cruel?

The Room is clearly out of hand, seemingly written and directed by a man who has never had contact with another human being. It is only popular due to its perceived "badness," yet, the film manages, somehow, to transcend merely being "so bad it's good." Wiseau's *The Room* had little potential for greatness. There was nothing worthwhile in its lackluster script, nothing new or shocking or even remotely interesting. It is incredible that the sum of the film's parts amount to anything, but they do, making the film valuable for more than just laughs. *The Room* is unlike any other film before it.

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