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
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. 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. 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. 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. 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.
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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

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

![The official promotional poster for The Room.](image)

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

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?”

“G 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). 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. 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. Importantly, Sconce notes that when
“smart” audiences do consume mass culture, they
do so only “in quotation marks.”

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.” 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. Although some would admit that Rosenblatt’s
proclamation was premature, 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.” 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. 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,
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.”

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.”

*The Room*, in effect, 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. *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 naif 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].” 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

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, “Genercity 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.
11 Terefenko, Ibid.
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.
22 Ibid.
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