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The Phenomenon of 'The Room'

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> *"Art must must carry man's craving for the ideal, must be an expression of his reaching out towards it; that art must give man hope and faith. And the more hopeless the world in the artist's version, the more clearly perhaps must we see the ideal that stands in opposition - otherwise life becomes impossible! Art symbolises the meaning of our existence."*

—— Andrei Tarkovsky, Sculpting in Time I sit alone on a train, reading 'Sculpting In Time', Tarkovsky's tantalizing tome, who considered one of the best filmmakers in the history of cinema, while commuting to watch 'The Room', Tommy Wiseau's woeful work, considered one of the worst filmmakers in the history of cinema. I am about to watch his infamous film on the big screen. It feels like I am close to an achievement. I am about to do something that not many people dare to do. I understand them, but only now, before the screening.

I discovered that you can watch 'The Room' on a big screen in London when I went to the Prince Charles Cinema to watch Scorsese's Taxi Driver. Tommy Wiseau's greenish face was on a poster on the facade, along with other announcements. 'Wait, what?', I thought. 'What

rational human being would watch it?', I pondered. Two years have passed since that moment, and now that rational human being is me.

I emerge from the Tube at Oxford Circus and hurry through the semi-masked, hectic crowd, past drunk, crawling Soho, and under the red blanket of sky lanterns in Chinatown towards Leicester Square and The Prince Charles Cinema. It is the only place I've been to where I could feel my love for films. This cinematic sanctuary maintains a unique atmosphere and attention to detail. It resembles the movie theaters I saw in American movies from the 80s and 90s. That was the only image of a cinema I had in my mind before the age of 18 (I will come back to this later), which makes the whole experience a bit nostalgic and almost surreal. You watch arguably the worst movie in the "ideal" cinema just minutes after reading a book by the best filmmaker.

I join the queue outside. My ticket on my phone is checked, and I am warmly welcomed to the screen. I go downstairs, my QR code is scanned, and I hurry to my F4 seat through the dimly lit descent. I sit down and prepare to spend my £14.25.

Next to me on all sides, there is no one but social distancing. Seats are covered with blankets featuring a white print that reads, "This seat is on furlough." I wait through ironic ads, anti-plague guidelines, and trailers for 'Alien' and 'Die Hard'. Then Tommy Wiseau appears on the screen in his now-iconic image – a shaggy man in sunglasses, shirt, vest, and tie. He intimately wishes us to enjoy 'The Room,' and the film begins.

The screening of 'The Room' is not a usual film screening, not because

of the film itself, but because of the people and how they watch it. The audience participates in the cinematic cult. If you know the iconic 'The Rocky Horror Picture Show,' you know what I mean. This participatory picture is more than a film; it's a phenomenon, a piece of culture that has outgrown its medium, becoming something else. Don't anticipate complete darkness and silence. Viewers are encouraged to participate in the screening, often dress accordingly, and learn special phrases to shout during them as reactions to what happens and what characters do.

It was too late when I learned that 'The Room' is in the same category, maybe not as much as 'The Rocky Horror' but more than most of the films I know. And at the same time, I learned that due to the plague, you aren't allowed to "participate" in the screening of 'The Room' now. You can't shout or throw spoons towards the screen, as viewers usually do. My disappointment was premature, and although I didn't get "the whole experience," it was still unlike any other screening I'd been to.

Although it was politely forbidden to shout, a few guys were still doing it. They shouted "Meanwhile in San Francisco!" every time the scenery of the city appeared on the screen. They shouted "Best Friend!" every time Johnny said to Mark that he was his best friend. They shouted "Shut the door!" every time a character in the film didn't do it after coming in or going out (and they did it quite often). They shouted "Who the fuck are you?" when a not-established character appeared in the last 30 minutes. They shouted "Scotchka!" when Lisa made the famous scotch-vodka cocktail for Johnny.

It was only the smallest possible fraction of what it could be without the anti-plague restrictions. Let's thank the guys who were brave enough to break the rules and allowed us to see 'The Room' as it was meant to be seen.

The shouts, however, are only a part of the participation. Everyone was laughing, constantly, with brief intermissions of silence. I'd never laughed that much at the cinema and hardly ever at any other film. 'The Room' is a drama, a soap opera, with quite a mundane plot, but it's not a comedy; it wasn't intended to be a comedy. But it ended up being one, and quite a good one. I felt like I was part of an audience on the set of a low-budget sitcom – poor cinematography, actors behaving strangely, and every line or movement accompanied by laughter. But in the case of 'The Room', it was genuine. It felt like the only way of watching it, the true way.

When you watch it, your brain struggles to comprehend what's going on. You are watching a drama, but you are laughing. You are watching a bad film, but you are enjoying it. You are in the cinema, but it feels like a friend's party. And it didn't feel like a mockery of a bad film at all. Everyone, including me, was genuinely enjoying the hilarious and almost surreal journey into the mind of the disaster artist.

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*"Most of all I dread mediocrity : a work should either be very good or very bad, but, for its life, not mediocre. Mediocrity that takes up thirty printed sheets is something quite

> unpardonable."

— Dostoevsky in one of his letters* There was no cinema theatre in the village where I lived for the first 17 years of my life. My cinephile self was born in a blend of cheap yo-ho-ho VHS, late-night screenings on TV, my own recordings of them on VHS, cutting film descriptions from newspaper TV programs, and drawing and coloring covers by hand. The same was true with DVDs later on.

In those early years, I didn't have IMDb, Rotten Tomatoes, Metacritic, or any other website where people rate films and praise or decry them. All I had was a synopsis in a TV program or on the back of a VHS or DVD. For me, there was no definition of a "bad film" or "good film" conditioned by an abstract number. There were only films I watched dozens of times and films I watched only once. Films I forgot about and films that hold a vivid place in my memory.

But this distinction exists now. Inadvertently, I rate every film either by deconstructing it into building blocks or relying solely on emotions. The question is then how our herd mentality defines what makes a film good or bad. Is there something in between? What if the goodness scale is not a line but a circle, and once a terrible film crosses a certain threshold, it suddenly becomes great? What is the ideal position on this circle? Where does 'The Room' lie on the circle?

There is a French word, *nanar*. It is used to categorize films that are bad but enjoyable, hilarious, meme-like, "so bad, it's good." If you Google it

and check the images, you will understand what it means.

On the 'Nanar' wiki page, there's a picture of 'Plan 9 from Outer Space' by Ed Wood, who, together with Tommy Wiseau, is claimed to be the worst filmmaker of all time. We can argue which of them is the best at being the worst, but they both became famous, they both had biographical feature films made about them, and they both took a special place in history, not as evil film terrorists but as filmmakers who tried.

Although it primarily consists of B-movies and trash films, 'Nanar' isn't a genre. Any film and any artist can end up there. But you need to be special. Your film has to have the ability to be enjoyable, fun, interesting, and meaningful for the culture while being notoriously bad in all its aspects – writing, directing, acting, and cinematography. This is what makes those films different. But what is more important is how they were made.

All nanar films are sincere filmmaking attempts. They were made with a cinephile's passion, not with the lust for money as a lucrative producer's marionette. Sometimes they are a result of someone's ego and a self-indulgent itch to be famous, but the attempt is always genuine. People like Tommy Wiseau, Ed Wood, Uwe Boll, Alexander Nevsky[1], and many others who created films that last and are loved by many regardless of what we call quality. They did not stop doing what they love, and they did not disown their creations. Their films are enjoyable not because of exceptional drama or award-worthy performances, but

because they are hilarious, almost surreal, and allow you to relax, switch off, and have fun. The escapism of art at its best.

Not everyone can watch those films, not everyone can give themselves into the hands of nanar and forget about what a good or bad film is. You can't analyze them, you can't approach them rationally, and you can't watch them in silence, alone. They must be watched with friends, wishing to have a good time with a piece of cinema, all together. The rational and conventional definition of art and quality stops being important. What's left is purely the ritual.

Going back to Tarkovsky, if art satisfies my craving for the ideal, what can films like 'The Room' offer me? I can hardly answer that, but at least, the film indulged my craving for the opposite of the ideal, the ideal "bad" film.

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Notes

1. I bet you haven't heard about this guy, but he claims himself to be the Russian Schwarzenegger, although he makes films in Hollywood

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