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Cover Page Footnote

A version of this essay was presented at 8th International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry. The author thanks Dr. Nathan Stucky and his anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful feedback.

The Performance Cult of *The Room*: Embodied Audiencing and Movie Riffing as Shared Sense-making

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*This ethnographic study explores everyday cultural performance and embodied audiencing practices at a performance-centered midnight screening of the 2003 cult film *The Room*. Prior to attending and co-performing the film's group audiencing ritual, the author explores fan appropriation of the previously obscure film and fan-generated and circulated performance scripts. Drawing on thick description and bodily knowledge gained from attending and performing *The Room*'s audiencing ritual, the author explores how the ritual's scripts are embraced, embellished, and deviated from while critiquing problematic aspects of the ritual. Within these intersections, the author discusses ways in which cultural performance and embodied audiencing practices can teach us about the ways in which audiences interact with and make sense of mediated texts.*

Keywords: Performance Studies; Ethnography; Cultural Performance; Riffing; Audiencing

*"In the dynasty of dung, among the many pretenders to the best worst movie throne, Tommy Wiseau and his oddly named tragedy truly earns its [sic] rotten rep. *The Room* may be only slightly better than a sharp stick in the eye, but the damage is equally irreparable."*

Bill Gibron, *PopMatters*

*"It is one of the most important films of the past decade. It exposes the fabricated nature of Hollywood. *The Room* [sic] is the *Citizen Kane* [sic] of bad movies."*

Ross Morin, Assistant Professor of Film Studies,
St. Cloud State University (q. in Collis).

*"When you see '*The Room*' you can yell, you can scream, you can express yourself, that's the idea. And I always say, you can laugh you can cry, you can express yourself, but please don't hurt each other."*

Tommy Wiseau, Director of *The Room*
("The Room: Audience Participation Guide")

Matt Foy is a Ph.D student at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. A version of this essay was presented at the 8th International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry. The author thanks Dr. Nathan Stucky and his anonymous reviewers for their thoughtful feedback.

As I enter the low-lit theater space of the 97-year-old Art Theater, the only locally owned commercial theater in Champaign, Illinois (Morris), I am inundated by the chaotic collision of no less than three dozen sets of plastic spoons, smacking together in cacophonous stereo. It sounds like every member of some high school percussion band is playing along to his or her own private song—not with drumsticks but with plastic cutlery, of course. It is a wave of sound that can only make sense in the context of this space. A young man, perhaps a college student, wearing black-rimmed glasses, bashes an elaborate rhythm on the back of a theater seat; “You’ve been practicing,” a friend says to him. Another young man wearing a dozen plastic glow rings around his neck brushes my shoulder as he makes his way into the theater space, shaking a massive plastic bag containing perhaps five hundred spoons. “Can I get a handful of spoons?” a young woman asks as she plunges two hands into the bag.

Clutching a bag of popcorn between my teeth as I take off my jacket, I turn my attention to finding the perfect seat. Fifth or sixth row center is ideal for gathering thrown spoons, but those seats are already taken. I settle for a seat in the eighth row, center, as manic excitement builds inside the theater. It is a bizarre scene, one strikingly incongruous to the subdued “sit down, shut up, and turn off your phone” standard of etiquette in a typical United States commercial theater. Yet, to me, it is wonderfully appropriate for the occasion. “Oh hai,¹ David,” a voice behind me says in a syrup-thick faux-European accent. “Are you guys ready for *The Room*? Ha ha ha.”

He probably wasn’t talking to me, but I was ready and already certain my pilgrimage to Champaign would not disappoint. Donning my official *The Room* t-shirt and carrying a conservative fifteen spoons in my pocket, I had just driven two hundred miles to see *The Room*—not a prohibitive distance for a pilgrimage, but one longer than one would normally travel to see a film he or she has at home on DVD. But then, *The Room* is anything but a normal film, and when its devoted cult audience (sometimes known as *Roomies*) comes together, one is never in for a normal film-viewing experience.

In addition to serving as a personal pilgrimage in tribute to one of my favorite films, my September 2, 2011, trip to the Art was also a scholarly venture. As part of my ongoing study of audiencing rituals and performative movie riffing,² I approached that night’s screening of *The Room* as an ethnographic site, one I hoped would be rich in cultural performance and collaborative meaning-making. My overarching inquiry: what kinds

1 Rather than the common spelling “hi,” the irregular spelling of “hai” is preferred among *The Room* fans when discussing the film. “Oh hai, [name] is the preferred greeting for *The Room* fans and is almost always vocalized in a facsimile of Tommy Wiseau’s famously thick European accent.

2 As it pertains to film, I define riffing as the act of responding to an aspect of the film with a comment or quip, often humorous, sarcastic, or informative. When audience members engage in conspicuous riffing, they attempt to usurp the film as the primary form of audience entertainment.

of performance rituals occur at screenings of *The Room* (the film itself metonymic for the kinds of participation-oriented screenings of cult films often referred to as *midnight movies*), and what can these rituals teach us about the ways cult film audiences employ cultural performance to interact with and make sense of their beloved films? I had done my research. I had my part in this group performance down pat. What remained was to perform my role and experience *The Room* in a new way.

Performance Ethnography: The Importance of Being in the Room

Dwight Conquergood writes, “Ethnographers study the diversity and unity of cultural performances as a universal human resource for deepening and clarifying the meaningfulness of life” (“Performing” 1). Audience performances during screenings of *The Room* constitute a fascinating site of cultural performance, one at which the playful carnivalesque (Bakhtin) motif of acting out in a traditionally disciplined space obscures a fruitful site of shared meaning-making. I chose *performance ethnography* as my method of accessing this site and the bodily knowledge it contains. I had to *be there* to understand what this embodied knowledge could mean.

One need not venture far into cyberspace to locate semi-official *The Room* audience participation scripts and guides: a simple Google search retrieves several fan-generated documentations of the behaviors associated with seeing *The Room* live. This being the case, I could have saved gas and mileage and simply analyzed *The Room* scripts as rhetorical texts. To do so would miss the point; reducing audience performance rituals to closed scripts is to strip the performers—whose embodiment animates the script and legitimates its very existence—of their roles, which must be foregrounded. As it would turn out, it was often moments of divergence from the script that I found most intriguing.

With this in mind, making my pilgrimage, not only to observe but also to *co-perform*, was absolutely necessary. Conquergood reminds us, “Ethnography is an *embodied practice*; it is an intensely sensuous way of knowing” (“Rethinking” 352), while Ronald J. Pelias writes, “researchers must be willing to use their own voices and bodies as tools of exploration” (“Performance as a Method” 252). Joni L. Jones demands, “If people are genuinely interested in understanding culture, they must put aspects of that culture on and into their bodies” (7). My performance that night probably did not stand out among the others in the crowd, but in performing my relationship with the film and with the audience, I accessed bodily knowledge that would not have been possible as a detached observer, much less watching the film at home on DVD.

As I observed and co-performed in the Art that night, my own relationship to *The Room* became more richly nuanced. My familiarity with and appreciation for the film, in concert with my interest in audiencing rituals as a performance genre, helped me frame our group performance as something

more than playful ridicule: by converging with the unofficial performance script and diverging from it at times, we engaged the film uniquely and gave it new life in a way that obsessively conforming to a script would not have allowed. As Victor Turner and Edith Turner rightly observe, “To perform a ritual the same way twice is to kill it, for the ritual grows as we grow, its life recapitulates the course of ours” (148). Our shared performance that night formed as it only could in that space, at that time, with those performers.

In retrospect, I enjoyed many aspects of our unique performance that night; others made me uncomfortable about my role in performing them. These tensions were productive in that they reminded me of the need to be critical and reflexive of our public performances. From my unique standpoint of being a fan of *The Room* and having studied audience participation rituals in the past, I approached that night’s ethnographic site in a way that recalls Satoshi Toyosaki’s *critical complete-member ethnography* (CCME), which is useful in explaining the multiple hats worn by the critical ethnographer who gazes inward and outward as a scholar-performer:

CCME requires the researcher to simultaneously play three multiple roles: ethnographer of communication, critical ethnographer, and autoethnographer. I believe that this simultaneous-multiple-role-takings brings forth this possibility and performance of critical community membership in CCMEer’s own local cultures. (75)

I hoped embracing “an-insider-looking-in-and-out” approach (Toyosaki 65) would help me not only explore what is inspiring about audience participation with *The Room* but also what could be changed for the better, to be critical but also generous and reflexive in my critique. As this essay unfolds, I discuss both the positive and the problematic. But before we can understand the nature of audience performances with *The Room*, we should first consider the film itself, without which that night’s performance could never have existed.

Oh Hai, *The Room*: Anatomy of a Cult Film

Boiled to the bones of its plot, *The Room* is a fairly archetypical love triangle melodrama. Our star is Johnny—played by Tommy Wiseau, who also wrote and directed the film after raising its six million dollar budget independently³—an affable but naïve banker, who lives with and is absolutely devoted to his younger fiancé Lisa (Juliette Danielle). Lisa has grown dissatisfied with Johnny and initiates a sexual affair with Mark (Greg Sestero), Johnny’s best friend. Johnny eventually learns of their affair and,

3 On acquiring the film’s funding, Wiseau cryptically told *The LAist*: “Well, let’s put it this way. I have certain resources. Some people do, some people don’t” (Shatkin). He later told *Entertainment Weekly* his funding was related to importing Korean leather jackets (Collis). *The Room*’s precise funding source, along with Wiseau’s place of birth, are two questions Wiseau consistently refuses to answer in question-and-answer sessions.

at his surprise birthday party, attacks Mark. Lisa leaves Johnny for Mark, prompting Johnny to destroy his apartment and commit suicide by self-inflicted gunshot. Mark and Lisa find Johnny's body, and Mark declares he has no relationship with Lisa as police sirens blare in the background.

But a dynamic plot is the last thing that fans of *The Room* want; the aforementioned synopsis consumes only the first ten and final ten minutes of the film's ninety-nine-minute runtime. The bulk of the film is composed of a cavalcade of plot cul-de-sacs, awkward dialogue between underdeveloped characters of varying importance to the plot, and four softcore sex scenes (three in the film's first twenty-five minutes), not to mention frequent continuity problems and out-of-focus camera work. In addition to Johnny, Lisa, and Mark, the key players include Denny (Philip Haldiman), a good-natured but awkward man-child who lives next to Johnny (Johnny pays his college tuition) and seems to lack basic social skills (early in the film, he joins Johnny and Lisa in bed pre-coitus to "watch them" but seems unaware of the sensitive nature of his request), and Claudette (Carolyn Minnott), Lisa's mother who simultaneously praises Johnny while encouraging Lisa to exploit him financially because she cannot support herself. Other characters meander in and out without affecting the plot, mostly as foils to establish Johnny's pristine character or Lisa's manipulative heartlessness. The result is a film so earnest yet strange that it attracts audiences through morbid revulsion.

The road to cult immortality is not a linear one. *The Room* was savaged by film critics when released in theaters on June 27, 2003. Critiquing the film as a conventional drama in the wake of its theatrical release, *Variety's* Scott Foundas famously dismissed Wiseau as a "narcissist nonpareil," noted the film's "extreme unpleasantness" and "overall ludicrousness," and reported audience members asking for their money back within the film's first thirty minutes. In a limited two-week run, the film was reported as grossing a meager \$1,900 (Collis). By all logic, Wiseau's feature film debut should have been doomed to obscurity.

Thanks to audience appropriation, *The Room* re-emerged as a cult phenomenon and has been cited (e.g., Collis, Vance) as the heir apparent to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* as the quintessential midnight moviegoing experience. I was unable to mark a specific point in time when *The Room* morphed from a commercially unviable melodrama to an unintentionally hilarious cult classic. But following a liminal period during which *The Room* was featured in a regular monthly midnight screening at Laemmle's Sunset 5 in West Hollywood (Wiseau frequently attended screenings to answer questions and talk with fans), the film's reputation for ineptitude helped it gain second life as a national phenomenon.

The Room's fame for unintentional hilarity was cemented by 2006 when discourse on the film begins to refer to its status as a midnight movie and acknowledge a dedicated audience. While *The Room* retains some signification as being the "inept melodrama" (J. R. Jones) for which it was

initially written off, discourse on the film now tends toward hyperbolic ridicule. *National Public Radio* deemed *The Room* “a cinematic train wreck” (Patel). *East Bay Express* compared Wiseau to iconic “bad movie” director Ed Wood (Vance). *Entertainment Weekly* mused, “If *The Room* [sic] is the *Citizen Kane* [sic] of bad movies, that makes Tommy Wiseau the Orson Welles of crap” (Collis para. 6).

The Ritual: *The Room* and Group Performance

“It’s mostly people shouting out lines and throwing footballs around,” a deep voice says in the row behind me. Tonight’s “midnight” screening is scheduled to begin at 10:00 p.m. At 9:59, the night’s first football flies through the air as two audience members begin an impromptu game of catch in the space between the front row and the screen. At 10:07, the film still has not begun; audience members raise spoons over their heads and click them together in invocation. “Be quiet!” a man shouts from the back row, reflexively subverting standard in-theater expectations of silence. For this utterance, he is rewarded with the first big audience *pop* (i.e., energetic round of applause and cheer) of the night. We in attendance are obviously aware that we are inverting what we have come to understand as proper in-theater behavior.

At 10:08, a theater representative strolls down the aisle to a round of applause. “Oh hai, everybody,” he announces before introducing the ritual’s good conduct rules: no plot spoilers, no vulgar language, and most importantly, no throwing footballs *at the screen*—implying, of course, that playing catch during the film is establishment-approved. As he walks back up the aisle, the clamoring of spoons grows louder. As the lights go out and the film begins to play, another “shhh” comes from the back of the theater, earning another loud pop.

As the credits roll, basic white text on black, we settle in with verbal riffing: Wiseau’s credit draws a pop, and Sestero’s credit is greeted with the scripted call of “Sestosterone”—wordplay referencing Sestero’s masculine good looks. There is also unscripted⁴ riffing: casting director Chloe Lietzke’s credit is greeted with “fire that chick.” Then the film opens with our first of many looks into Johnny and Lisa’s living room (ostensibly, the titular “Room”). In this first scene, Johnny gives Lisa the gift of a red dress. Unscripted, someone cries out: “It’ll never fit. It’s red. You’re fat,” despite Lisa’s relatively (though perhaps not quite Hollywood) thin figure. Riffing on Lisa’s appearance will remain a common trope, and for me a problematic one, throughout the night’s proceedings. Another performer calls out: “You didn’t get your promotion; she won’t have sex with you,” forecasting one of many famously fruitless plot alcoves: later in the film, we learn Johnny

4 Because there is no one official script, distinctions between scripted and unscripted are necessarily arbitrary on my part. In this essay, “unscripted” refers to comments not explicitly detailed in my sampling of *The Room* audience participation guides.

is frustrated by not getting a promised promotion at work. So much for the no-spoiler rule.

Mere minutes into the film, we are treated to the first of four softcore sex scenes, this being the first of two between Johnny and Lisa. It is customary to perform disgust or faux-enthusiasm for the sex scenes, and we waste no time doing so with a variety of responses. Many walk out of the theater, signifying a rejection of the lure of scopophilic pleasure intended by on-screen sex. Others pelt Johnny's naked torso with spoons, the first of the night's many spoonstorms. Others express their displeasure by shouting obscene castigations at the screen. Others comment on the fact that Johnny (who by appearances is assumed to be around thirty years older than Lisa, another frequently commented-upon dimension of their awkward on-screen chemistry) appears to be penetrating Lisa's navel; "You're doing it wrong, Tommy!" someone shouts, undercutting Wiseau's masculinity. I opt for inarticulate hollering. While I wouldn't consider myself prudish, I cannot deny these sex scenes, overdubbed with Wiseau's moaning and trademark "ha ha ha" chuckling, are anything but affectively pleasing. But I cannot help but be disappointed in one fellow nearby who repeatedly calls Lisa fat. He does so within aural distance of at least three women larger than Lisa, and though they do not appear outwardly offended—rather, they seem to be having great fun throwing spoons in the air—I desire this space to be inclusive. I experienced the rest of the evening's performance with this tension: reveling in the raucous environment and love for the film, but pausing for critical reflection on the nature of the performance art we were in the act of creating.

Shortly before midnight, the film reaches its end. As the camera pulls back from the film's final shot, we rise for a standing ovation and one last spoon shower. And when chants of "Tommy, Tommy, Tommy!" ground to a halt, the ritual has ended. Whatever spoons we still hold, we let fall harmlessly to the floor as we gather our things and head for the exits. "That was awesome!" one man says as he waves a plastic glow stick above his head, waving it back and forth to the rhythm of the credit song "You Are My Rose." A few couples linger to slow dance on a bed of spoons. As I gather my things, one man says to another as they pack up, "let's get some fresh air outside." My pilgrimage was over. All there was left to do was attempt to make sense of what we had created that night.

A *thick description* (Geertz) of and ideological meditation on every utterance and gesture of the night would be an exhausting project, one simultaneously reductive and counterproductive to the experience of corporeally being in that space. If I walked out of the Art with one undeniable sentiment, it was this: there is something truly special about *being there*, about being one unruly body of many in a public space normally defined by silence and isolation—a space for which, despite a lifelong love of film, I had lost affection long ago because of that isolation. Certainly we were not really *acting out* against anything in a way that was going to change the way

audiences en masse approach commercial film. But even if our performance was sanctioned, largely scripted, and confined to a single theater, I was witness and co-performer to a fascinating ritual of meaning-making, a shared act of creative alchemy between an established script and a convergence of unscripted speech acts that made for a unique experience.

Of the performance ethnographer *as witness*, Pelias writes: “They take on the role of one who has been there, telling how they made sense of the events they saw, sharing how their presence had an impact on themselves and others, filtering all they want to say through their own experiences” (“Performance Ethnography” 3392). In the following section, I reflect on aspects of the night’s performance that I found most striking, balancing my experiences in the theater space with my rhetorical assumptions of the performance script.

Getting Off-Script: Salient Moments in Scripted and Unscripted Performance

To me, the most interesting dynamics of our performance were the ways in which we at times adhered to a circulated and easily accessible script—I have no doubt many in attendance knew the script and purposefully performed large portions of it—and how individual performers at times altered the script in ways that changed the experience further still. While *The Room* is frequently compared to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, I experienced this kinship more in spirit than in performance. The principle difference: *Rocky Horror* is scripted to the point its performance ritual has become rigid, its own form of discipline despite its energy. Of the *Rocky Horror* experience, Michael Dean observes that:

the audience response is ritualized and appended to the film as a kind of extra-diegetic, interactive performance. In the case of *Rocky Horror*, the audience activities are invariably cued by the movie—effectively extensions of the film that function as a kind of participatory homage rather than a critique. (122)

One “Audience Participation Guide” for *The Room* foregrounds the privileged role of improvisation: “By trying to keep the rigid participation to a minimum, the audience’s genius can be unleashed. The more you go to live viewings, the more you’ll look forward to the innovative humor that others bring” (1).

Perhaps in no part of *The Room* ritual is this improvisation on display more than in participants’ frequent, fluid projectile deployment of plastic spoons. On one level, the spoons have a significance clearly rooted in the film: one of the decorations in Johnny and Lisa’s living room is a framed photo of a spoon, and whenever the photo is visible (I count nine scenes), the ritual calls for the performer to cry out “Spoon!” and hurl spoons at the screen. But over time the spoons have become an all-purpose projectile-slash-prop: they are noisemakers before, during, and after the film; they are thrown during the

sex scenes to denote disgust; they are thrown into the air when iconic lines are delivered; they are thrown at the screen during moments of tension, such as in one memorable cul-de-sac when drug dealer Chris-R (Dan Janjigian) suddenly appears and pulls a gun on Denny⁵; they are playfully tossed at performers moving in the aisles; they are thrown up, forward, backward, and all around at any random point in the film. It seems spoons are flying more often than not—at times out of boredom or restlessness, with no clear signifier. They become extensions of our bodies, marking any instance we see fit with significance.

After the plastic spoon, the football is the icon most closely associated with *The Room* (my Tommy Wiseau talking bobblehead carries a football and a red rose, the latter being a gift for Lisa). The football's role in the ritual references four scenes in which the film's male characters play catch with a football. Though playing catch is a familiar symbol of male bonding, *The Room's* peculiar version of football is a target of ridicule, particularly one memorable scene in which the cast plays catch while wearing rented tuxedos. As one participation guide explains:

If you love football, or the approximation of playing football by a person who has never actually played football ... you will love the scene in *The Room* where guys toss about the football as they stand two feet away from one another. It's less football and more a quick game of hot potato. (Johnston para. 3)

At theaters in which football is allowed by management, performers approximate the film's football soft-tossing by frolicking in the aisles or gathering in the space between the screen and front row and tossing a football back and forth. At the Art, all four on-screen appearances of a football are accompanied by in-theater football tossing; each time, several performers rise and play catch while running laps around the theater as they are playfully pelted with spoons. In a scene in which Johnny and Mark run in a park (sans football), a group of nine performers rises and runs laps in the aisles. These embodied performances elicit much applause from the crowd and seem less like jokes than ridiculous homages to the film's wanderlust.

Not all theaters allow footballs, and it is easy to see why. At the Art, one game of catch spreads until a football is being thrown from near the screen to the back of the theater. As I watch in consternation as the ball soars over my head, the borders of the performance come into focus: not only can a flying football injure an unsuspecting theater patron, a football hitting the movie screen is anathema for fear of permanently damaging it. Either incident is likely to assure *The Room* will never return to the theater. The possibility

5 Not everybody appreciates free-form spoonplay: when a small spoonstorm broke out during the Chris-R scene (which takes place on the rooftop of Johnny's building, the film's second most frequent setting), one performer angrily shouted, "there's no spoons on the screen, dumbass."

of harm and its consequences and the real threat of the ritual's permanent banishment remind me that our in-theater behavior is allowed to transgress normal theater decorum only insofar as it remains ephemeral and leaves no undesired traces.

The Room's ritual most closely resembles *Rocky Horror* in its scripted calls when characters enter or exit a scene, which seems to happen constantly, often with an "oh hai [entering character's name]" from Johnny or a similar greeting. Denny, in particular, seems to come and go simply for the sake of doing so; in-theater performers infallibly greet Denny ("hai, Denny!") or bid him goodbye ("bye, Denny!") in unison whenever he does. Mark is greeted with "Sestosterone!" when he enters the scene, though not with the enthusiasm reserved for Denny.

When non-principle characters enter the scene, performers foreground their superfluous presence by crying "who (or, *who the fuck*) are you?" In one instance of semi-scripted play on the film's inanity, several performers apply Johnny's ever-present "oh hai" to non-living objects: "oh hai, sidewalk; oh hai, newspaper." Another simple bit of riffing is tallying aloud whenever someone refers to Mark as Johnny's best friend. The "BFF" counter at the Art stopped at five, though at least eight such references exist in the film. In these simple exercises, I feel our performance reducing the film to a series of flawed choices but also staying engaged when the movie refuses to move the plot forward.

One noteworthy, hardly unproblematic, hallmark of *The Room's* performance script is its tendency toward misogynistic dialogue, which is most present in scenes consisting of dialogue between Lisa and Claudette. Lisa and Claudette's shared dialogue is repetitive: Lisa declares her lack of feelings for Johnny as Claudette enables Lisa while demeaning her for a lack of autonomy. It is customary to respond to problematic bits of dialogue with "because you're a woman," seemingly a derogatory riff on the popular, no less sexist "that's what she said" trope. For example, when Claudette says "darling, you can't support yourself," "because you're a woman" is the scripted response. As the film goes on, "because you're a woman" may be called out after any line from Lisa, Claudette, or Lisa's friend Michelle (Robyn Paris), though Michelle is critical of Lisa's attitude toward Johnny and life in general.

The pinnacle of the performance's anti-woman rhetoric comes midway through the film when Claudette abruptly discloses that she "definitely has breast cancer." Though the film abandons this declaration immediately and never addresses it again (hence, for Roomies, the basis of its hilarity), breast cancer comes to synecdochically represent Claudette. Performers cannot wait for Claudette's announcement of her affliction: in an early scene, when Lisa asks Claudette "what's wrong?" one performer calls out "my breast cancer hurts!" to a big pop. In a later scene, dialogue from Claudette prompted this series of riffs: "because you're a woman" ...

“because you’re a whore” ... “because you have breast cancer”—each one in response to the previous, a morbid chain reaction of (as I experienced it) offensive, destructive vulgarity.

While “because you’re a woman” is a scripted standard, unscripted riffs on Lisa’s physical appearance preserve the misogynistic tone—reminding me that the ultimate spirit of the ritual, constructive or destructive, is with the embodiment, not the script. Though Juliette Danielle’s figure is curvy but ostensibly trim, several performers (all, to the best of my determination, sounded like men) relish in calling her fat, with one aforementioned man across the aisle cursing her as fat seemingly at each full-body shot. When performers are not demeaning Lisa’s figure, they are busy castigating her promiscuity: branding her a “whore” (one performer single-handedly started a “whore” chant during a benign exchange with Michelle), cursing Lisa for her “beef curtains,”⁶ and throwing in a “that’s what she said” (in response to “it’s [the front door] open”) for good measure.

In December 2011, I staged a brief mini-performance of *The Room*’s performance ritual in an ethnography class. More than one of my feminist colleagues were taken aback by “because you’re a woman” and the script’s making light of breast cancer. At the Art I chose not to perform the misogynistic bits because they clash with my own gender politics—to put those lines and attitudes in my body threatens to ruin my enjoyment of the show. Still, I tried to be generous in my reading of these questionable riffs; rather than souring on the ritual as a whole, I questioned why performers, including women, go after Lisa and Claudette with such hatred. Out of context, certainly these riffs are disturbing, so much so that one would be justified in questioning whether *The Room*’s performance ritual constitutes a destructive bit of sexist hegemony. That night in the theater, though, I filtered my feelings on these riffs through the lens of the text, asking *what is present in the film to which these hateful words respond?* My most charitable interpretation is that the anti-woman slant responds to the presence of that sentiment in the film itself. As one critic astutely observes: “The way the female characters speak and behave in the film suggests that Wiseau’s understanding of the gender is, shall we say, less than progressive” (Johnston para. 7). Is it possible we as a group were ironically mimicking the film’s anti-woman tone in an attempt to take away its power? Was it possible we were comedically *over*-performing the film’s rhetoric to sabotage it?

Upon a closer reading, the film-as-text itself is palpably misogynistic, and the performance magnifies Wiseau’s apparent flawed ideology in a way that recalls Kenneth Burke’s discussion of *perspective by incongruity*: “it cherishes

6 Some *The Room* screenings are more vulgar than others, and our performance at the Art was cumulatively more vulgar than the average script calls for. In addition to references to “blow jobs” and Johnny drinking urine, in one disturbing sequence during the film’s violent climax, Johnny was encouraged to “fuck” the red dress he gifted Lisa in the film’s opening scene. Unfortunately, Johnny never fails to oblige, taking time to apparently masturbate with the dress before killing himself.

the lore of so-called ‘error’ as a *genuine aspect of the truth*, which emphasizes valuable for the correcting of present emphases” (“Perspective by Incongruity” 265). This also helps me to understand the rhetorical function of derogatory comments on Lisa’s appearance. The film unabashedly *insists* that Lisa is irresistibly beautiful and sexy: seemingly every character in the film with a line of dialogue makes a point of saying Lisa is sexy (one nameless character uses his only line of dialogue to make this point). Performers resist the film’s insistence, this time by taking the sentiment to the other extreme with similar force, portraying Lisa as grotesque. To some, this ridicule could function as “a constant juxtaposition of incongruous words, attaching to some name a qualifying epithet which had heretofore gone with a different order of names” (Burke, *Permanence* 90). In two cases when the film turns violent—in one scene, Johnny pushes Lisa onto the couch during an argument; in another, he calls Lisa a “bitch” (along with “her stupid mother”)—the audience turns on Johnny with boos and jeers, suggesting Lisa is not utterly despised. While this generous reading may provide a degree of insight into how the misogyny of the script relates to the film, this aspect of *The Room* culture remains disturbing to me. Even if the script’s misogyny is intended to resist the film’s hatred of women, it seems to reify the film’s attitude, not refute it.

To this point, I have focused on performance rituals that reframe, augment, or work to negate aspects of the film. But perhaps the moments of sheerest delight come out of simply performing love (albeit with a twist of mock reverence) for the film through silence and release. Three memorable scenes, all characterized by Johnny’s awkward dialogue and idiosyncratic vocalization,⁷ stand out as the most outwardly delirious moments of joy. In the infamous flower shop scene, Johnny purchases roses for Lisa and shares the following awkward exchange with a shop clerk:

CLERK: *Can I help you?*

JOHNNY: *Yeah, can I have a dozen red roses please?*

CLERK: *Oh hai, Johnny, I didn’t know it was you. [Hands him a bundle of roses]. Here you go.*

JOHNNY: *That’s me. How much is it?*

CLERK: *That’ll be eighteen dollars.*

JOHNNY: *Here you go [hands her cash]. Keep the change [pats her dog, which sits on the counter, on the head]. Hai, doggie.*

CLERK: *You’re my favorite customer.*

7 As I join in applauding these scenes, I cannot help but struggle with guilt and concern over our repeated mocking of Wiseau’s awkward speech and heavy accent—Foundas and Shatkin assume Wiseau to be of Eastern European origin, while Gibron cruelly writes him off as “Euro-trash” (para. 1). Wiseau’s lines appear to be dubbed in post-production, which contributes significantly to his often bizarre dialogue. That said, it cannot be ignored that a large portion of ridicule directed at *The Room* is predicated on mocking Wiseau’s spoken English in a way that implies hostility or condescension toward non-native English speakers.

Later, in the film's most famous scene, Johnny caps a heated argument with Lisa by clenching his fists and, in an homage to *Rebel Without a Cause*, wailing "You're tearing me apart, Lisa!" In both of these scenes, performers hush each other—traditionally a hostile demand of silence in a darkened theater, now a call to the cult's benediction—and explode in applause afterward. For me, these sequences deftly capture the sublime nature of *The Room*: in these simple scenes, all the standards beats are there, but everything is skewed just enough for unintentional hilarity.⁸ For our performance, it is an affirmation, however derisive, of love and appreciation for the film.

In one mid-film sequence, Johnny delivers a brief but heartfelt meta-speech (in his own unique way) to Denny on his building's rooftop: "If a lot of people love each other, the world would be a better place to live." After the hush, performers may either burst into applause or chant "Yes we can! Yes we can!" The latter came to popularity during the 2008 presidential election; one *A.V. Club* blog written by *The Room* fans muses, "I like to think that's it [sic] one of those rare moments where irony and sincerity collide, neither quite dominating the other" (House of Qwesi para. 23). At the Art, we opted for the former: straightforward earnest applause. But in that moment, the palpable love in the air could not be dismissed as derision or scorn. I was reminded of a long-obscure promotional ad for Neil Simon's *The Goodbye Girl*, in which a film critic was quoted as saying, "thank you, Neil Simon, for making us laugh at falling in love ... again." Substituting Wiseau for Simon, I called out this line, generating a few snickers from people around me. But more importantly, I felt and meant every word.

Concluding Thoughts: Subversion or Reification?

Norman Denzin writes that performance ethnography, "Presumes an ethnographer, performer and social researcher who is part of, and a spokesperson for, a local moral community, a community with its own symbolism, mythology, and storytelling traditions" (257). Bryant Alexander advocates "using ethnography as a tool to excavate the meaningfulness of familiar cultural sites ... which offer greater opportunities for interpretation, translation, and transference" (108). I believe I have answered their calls in this essay, in which I have explored a performance space that, while perhaps not inherently subversive to audiencing practices, reminds us there is nothing natural or universal about the way most American moviegoers approach seeing a film in a theater.

One of the most striking aspects of seeing *The Room* live is the kinetic interplay between the performers in the audience and no less than two texts: the film and an audiencing script that continues to be added to and deviated

8 In interviews, Wiseau disputes the widely accepted notion that his film is a failed melodrama, insisting that the humor is purposeful "black comedy." Fans and critics alike reject that *The Room* was intended as anything but an earnest drama.

from with each screening.⁹ While *The Room*'s performance ritual is marked by more improvisation than its spiritual predecessor *Rocky Horror*, the former is also twenty-eight years younger than the latter. Certainly, if audiences in the year 2040 are still performing with *The Room* in theaters, the ritual will likely bear little resemblance to that which I observed in 2011. As with any theatrical production, audience participation rituals are always changing, and performers have their own stakes in how the ritual ought to be performed. As performance ethnographers, we should keep this in mind and continue to revisit audience performance rituals with frequency. Each incantation of the ritual is a snapshot in the lifespan of a living, changing entity, and to study it once and assume it will not change is misguided.

Juxtaposed with the way we usually watch films in a commercial theater, audience participation rituals such as that of *The Room* seem radically different, perhaps even subversive when compared to everyday filmgoing practices. With the ongoing cult popularity of *Mystery Science Theater 3000* and rituals such as *Rocky Horror* and *The Room*, it is worth questioning to what degree talking back to mediated texts such as films is a transgressive act. Writing on *MST3K*, the cult television show which features characters constantly talking over and back to "cheesy movies" (as per its theme song), Dean argues, "Even if the riffing done by the *MST3K* host aims largely for laughter rather than a specific political or historical critique, its willingness to violate the sanctity of a movie's frame and challenge the movie's terms of engagement can be seen as setting an empowering example for all audiences" (121).

Co-performing *The Room*'s ritual at the Art reminds me that an empowered audience is not necessarily a critical audience, nor should we forget that the discourse produced by an empowered audience can just as easily reify the problematic attitudes of the film as it can critique or subvert them. As was my experience, it required an extreme act of charity to interpret the audience's shared animosity toward Lisa as anything but hateful misogyny. Likewise, it is easy to interpret the mocking of Wiseau's thick accent and idiosyncratic vocalization in a way that marks collective hostility toward non-native English speakers. While my interactions with *The Room* fans do not lead me to believe the community truly hates women, we could adapt our performances (and eventually the scripts we circulate) to convey our disgust with the film's misogyny without sounding misogynistic ourselves. As much as I love the film and as much fun as I had at the Art, I would rather see *The Room* and its entire ritual fade to obscurity than witness

9 Another text often in play is a popular recorded commentary by movie riffing troupe RiffTrax. RiffTrax, founded by former *Mystery Science Theater 3000* head writer and host Michael J. Nelson, features Nelson and fellow *MST3K* alumni Bill Corbett and Kevin Murphy ridiculing commercial films via prerecorded MP3 tracks. Two recurring jokes at the Art, "oh, hai [inanimate object] and calling Lisa fat, appear in the RiffTrax commentary for *The Room* but not the performance scripts I sampled. The genesis of these motifs remains unclear.

Lisa still being called a fat whore in 2040. Having witnessed such collective creativity in action, I know we can do better. I know we can continue to craft the ritual until it is both fun and produces a more positive, critical discourse.

For me, these tensions mark the importance of not only studying audience performance rituals in broader strokes but paying close attention to the specific speech acts that surround the rituals before, during, and after such films. While we should continue to explore the degree to which audience participation rituals can and might constitute politically transgressive performance, it is undeniable that the discourse produced in these rituals *does something*: it changes the act of experiencing and making sense of films in ways that cannot be simply discarded. As Mikita Hoy observes, “The power of the word to effect its curse or blessing on the subject has always been regarded as an act full of magic significance” (295). The nature of these magical utterances, whether they challenge problematic discourses or reify them, is worthy of our continued inquiry.

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