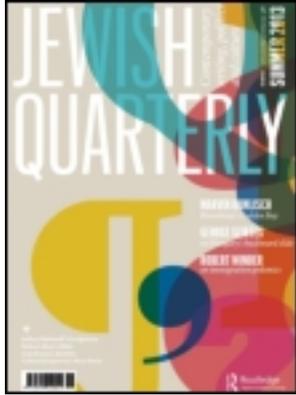


This article was downloaded by: [Nathan Abrams]

On: 28 April 2014, At: 09:14

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Jewish Quarterly

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjeq20>

Room for a Jewish disaster?

Nathan Abrams

Published online: 24 Apr 2014.

To cite this article: Nathan Abrams (2014) Room for a Jewish disaster?, Jewish Quarterly, 61:1, 58-60, DOI:

[10.1080/0449010X.2014.900360](https://doi.org/10.1080/0449010X.2014.900360)

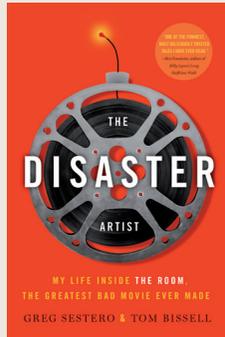
To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0449010X.2014.900360>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

ROOM FOR A JEWISH DISASTER?



The Room

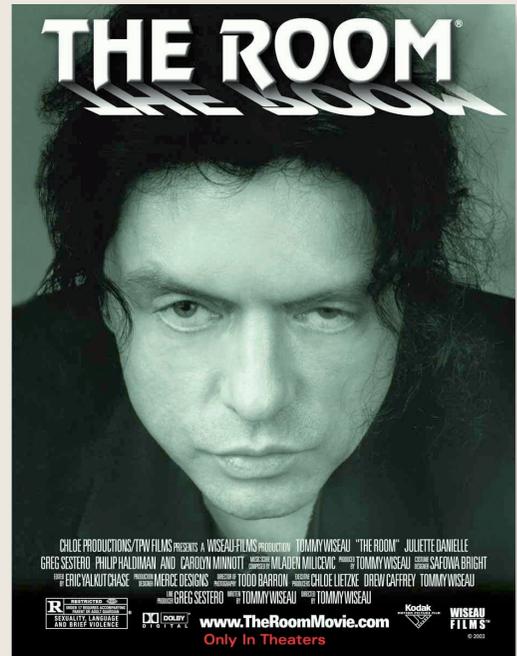
written and directed by
Tommy Wiseau

The Disaster Artist: My Life Inside *The Room*, the Greatest Bad Movie Ever Made

by *Greg Sestero and Tom Bissell*

NEW YORK: SIMON & SCHUSTER • 2013

Review by *Nathan Abrams*



It is a film of non-sequiturs, terribly bad dialogue, continuity errors, awfully poor acting, and a host of inexplicable other decisions. Yet it has spawned a cult following reminiscent of that which surrounds *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975). This film is *The Room*, a 2003 movie, conceived, written and directed by, as well as starring Thomas P. Wiseau, an individual so odd and extraordinary that he himself seems to be the product of a scriptwriter's imagination. But it is these very qualities that make *The Room* so fascinating.

This obscure film, of which I am sure many of this publication's readers have never heard let alone seen, and which bombed at the box office when it was released, has, however, spawned a somewhat curious afterlife. This can be described as 'cultic.' Fan fora obsess over the meaning of the film and attempt to deconstruct its discontinuities in a Dan Brownesque, *Da Vinci Code*, style, as if they will turn up hidden meanings. Followers turn up at midnight screenings, bring artefacts related to the film with them, engage in participatory rituals and generally revel in the film's awfulness. They may even be treated to an appearance of its creator in person.

What is more, it is these very qualities as a film that allow us to explore the very boundaries of Jewish film criticism itself. This is because there is nothing explicitly Jewish about the film, or its creator, whatsoever.

In the past, Jewish film criticism tended to isolate itself from the mainstream through the possibly fruitless, yet frustratingly ongoing, discussion of what constitutes Jewishness in terms of Jewish film. This was because

Jewish film critics and scholars alike took it upon themselves to only analyse and describe those films in which the Jewishness was on the surface, that is, where identifiably Jewish characters appeared or where 'Jewish' issues figured into the plot. As a result, they restricted themselves to explicit content only, wrongly assuming that Jewishness was present only when it appeared directly on screen. In this way, Jewish film critics and scholars adopted a very limited definition of Jewishness that was restricted to *visible* ethnicity. Furthermore, this was compounded by often confining themselves to Jewish practitioners (Woody Allen being a particular favourite).

An alternative approach, however, and one which I propose to use here, allows us to embrace the subsurface, implicit, symbolic, textually submerged, and conceptual Jewishness and Judaism that *may* be floating beneath the surface *in a way that may not have even been intended by its author*. Midrash (commentary), the kind of formal or informal elaboration on Jewish scripture, as a form of commentary, in order to elucidate or elaborate upon its hidden meanings, provides the perfect model for such a type of criticism.

The plot of *The Room* is, on the surface, very simple (and not at all Jewish). Johnny (Tommy Wiseau) is a banker seeking a promotion and living in a condo in San Francisco, where most of the action takes place, with his fiancée Lisa (Juliette Danielle). He seemingly has a good life but one which begins to unravel when Lisa sleeps with his best friend Mark (Greg Sestero). Eventually, after a series of subplots and distractions, none of which make much sense or give any overall shape to the film — spoiler alert — Johnny shoots himself.



f, in the midrashic mode, *The Room* represents scripture, then its accompanying oral law is the book, *The Disaster Artist*, by Greg Sestero and Tom Bissell. Sestero was an actor friend of Tommy's who appeared in the film as Mark, as well as filling the role of its non-existent line producer. The first line in his book presents us with the movie's midrashic possibilities, "Imagine a movie so incomprehensible that you find yourself compelled to watch it over and over again.

You become desperate to learn how (if) on earth it was conceived: Who made it, and for what purpose?" Sestero continues, and it is worth citing him at length:

The Room is—despite its ostensibly simple plot—perhaps the most casually surreal film ever made. To put it simply, *The Room* doesn't work in any way films have evolved to work over the last century of filmmaking. It's filled with red herrings, shots of locations that are never visited,

and entire conversations comprised of non sequiturs. It is, essentially, one gigantic plot hole. For many, experiencing *The Room* is both wildly exhilarating and supremely dislocating. The film engenders an obsessive fascination, instantly luring you into its odd, convoluted world.

Sestero then informs us that "Tommy Wiseau intended *The Room* to be a serious American drama, a cautionary tale about love and friendship". However, as Sestero warns us, "No one interprets the world the way Tommy Wiseau does". This one element alone provides the proverbial midrashic keys to *The Room's* front door. Although Wiseau "is the key to *The Room's* mystery", his opaque, elliptical, elusive, and uncommunicative nature mean that the real job of interpretation is left up to us, the viewer.

The first mystery is the movie's very title. 'The Room' gives us no indication of the genre, content, plot or narrative of the film. In a special Q&A feature filmed for the DVD release, Wiseau replies that the title is meant to evoke a safe place for viewers. It perhaps also refers to the space in which most of the action takes place — the front room of Johnny's apartment in San Francisco. An alternative suggestion, however, is that 'The Room' of the title is not an actual, physical space, but a metaphorical one, referring to the interior space of Johnny's head. This would explain the innumerable discontinuities, inconsistencies and lapses of logic of the plot; like a dream or memory, it does not need to make sense. To take just one example: at one point, it is revealed that Johnny and Lisa have been together for five years; later it becomes seven. Which is it? The actual number is unimportant because the whole story, and hence its details, are allegorical. This would also further explain the fake-looking nature of the apartment, resembling a showroom in a catalogue, rather than a real lived-in apartment. The DVD rack, for instance, only holds three DVDs. Dotted around are framed pictures of spoons. An incongruous fruit bowl sits on the coffee table. Other 'exterior' settings, it turns out, are also completely mocked up for the film. This includes the alleyway and the rooftop, both of which were in reality located in a parking lot. The shots of real San Francisco, particularly Golden Gate Park, only serve to emphasise the falsity of these other locations.

Many of the film's names have Biblical resonance. Its lead character, after all, is named Johnny. Johnny can be read as a synonym for Jack, which is short for Jacob (Ya'acov), the Biblical patriarch, whose sons are the ancestors of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Jacob is the son of Isaac, who cheats his brother Esau out of his birth right by fooling his blind father, but becomes nonetheless the father of the *B'nei Yisrael* (Children of Israel), after his name is

changed from Ya'acov (Jacob) to Yisrael (Israel) following his struggle with the angel (more on this later).

There are also Mark, Mike, Peter, and Steven. Is Johnny then some sort of Christ-like figure who — again, spoiler alert — is martyred for our sins? As Sestero relates it, Tommy made his character “the one spotless human being amid chaos, lies, and infidelity. Johnny was perfect. He was a lost innocent, a pure victim”. Tommy presents Johnny as the undeserving victim of all around him: “Everybody betrayed me!” he exclaims in anguish. Certainly, his death has resonances of the Gospels, in Johnny’s final cry, “God, forgive me” (although just exactly what he needs to be forgiven for is never made clear).

Pictures of spoons are dotted around the apartment. As a result, spoons have become a symbol attached to the film, and spoons are taken by viewers to screenings where they are thrown in the auditorium. Spoons have Biblical cultic significance for they are used in Temple worship.

After the plastic spoon, the American football is the icon most closely associated with *The Room*. Football appears in four of the film’s scenes in which its male characters toss a football among themselves. While the football is clearly meant to stand as a metonym for America, its appearance *four* times in the film invokes the Judaic approach known as *PaRDeS*. *PaRDeS*, an acronym for *Peshat* (‘plain’/‘simple’); *Remez* (‘hint’); *Derash* (‘to inquire’/‘seek’); and *Sod* (‘secret’/‘mystery’), seeks to penetrate a text through four layers of seeing. Indeed, the number four punctuates the film: consider the number of letters in ‘Room’, or that the film’s credits lists only four separate music tracks.

¶

Maybe the film’s Jewish resonances reside in Wiseau’s extraordinary otherness. Wiseau is certainly an outsider, a loner, and a wanderer whose origins appear to be in Eastern Europe via France, although no one is entirely certain because they are never clearly ascertained or confirmed. Adding to the mystery is Wiseau’s refusal to reveal both his exact name and funding source of the film and Sestero relates how Thomas P. Wiseau is a change from his (unknown) original legal name. If so, he stands as a living metonym of those early Jewish pioneers who, on arriving in America, changed their names, and went on to develop the Hollywood studio system. Like them, Tommy sees promise in America, a place where he can make a \$6m film, funded entirely from his own pocket. Jews in early Hollywood

became American by building and projecting a kind of fantasy America which Americans then bought into. Wiseau appears to have done the same — he projects into Sestero an idealised version of American youth — and in the film Wiseau’s character seems to be a romanticised version of a great all-American guy (especially in the football scenes). And, as Sestero tells it, “Johnny’s story was the perfect American drama — in Tommy’s mind anyway”.

What is more, the wandering and the obscure origins all buy into Jewish stereotypes. Furthermore, Wiseau himself suggests that he is a vampire. Sestero adds that he is possibly extra-terrestrial. Both images have attached themselves to Jews over the years from Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) through to the extraordinary book, *Les Juifs de l’espace/The Lost Tribes from Outer Space* (1974), by Marc Dem in which he argues — seriously — that Jews come from space and will one day return there.

The Room allows us to expand the possibilities of Jewish film criticism in new, interesting, and potentially fruitful ways. Whether you buy my argument with this film, it should certainly be applied to others. I, for one, will continue to probe the film’s mysteries and secrets, not least by attending one of its cultic screenings. —JQ

‘Sestero warns us
“No one interprets
the world the
way Tommy
Wiseau does.
This one element
alone provides
the proverbial
midrashic key to
The Room’s front
door’

Nathan Abrams is Professor of Film Studies at Bangor University. He has written widely on transatlantic Jewish film, history, politics and popular culture with specific reference to the United States and the United Kingdom. His most recent book is The New Jew in Film: exploring Jewishness and Judaism in Contemporary Cinema (2012).

DOI:10.1080/0449010X.2014.900360 © Nathan Abrams 2014