# 'Most People Bring Their Own Spoons': *The Room*'s participatory audiences as comedy mediators

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## Abstract

*The Room* (Tommy Wiseau, 2003) has developed the unenviable reputation as being one of the worst films ever made, yet at the same time is celebrated by 'fans' who take considerable pleasure from its perceived ineptitude. Considerable media attention has also been afforded to the film's participatory theatrical screenings, which typically feature constant heckling, chants, and the throwing of plastic spoons. Through the analysis of the film's British audiences (in the form of surveys, interviews, observation and autoethnography), this article argues that *The Room* demonstrates the impact of audience participation on a film's reception, which in this case transforms an ostensible drama into a comedy experience. These audiences function as temporary communities that encourage the search for humour in 'badness', creating a cycle of comedy mediation and verification that affirms the interpretive competence of all attendees. The article begins to theorise the previously underdeveloped concept of 'so bad it's good' by drawing a link between comedy and cult media audiences, as well as exploring the social functions of comedy as they relate to cultural texts.

**Keywords:** *The Room*, comedy, cult media, audiences, fandom, 'so bad it's good', reception, participation, community, legitimation.

With the regrettable exception of some popcorn at the age of twelve, this was the first time I had ever thrown anything in a cinema. It was July 2010, and as the film played out in front of me at the Prince Charles Cinema, London, I was relishing the opportunity to launch plastic cutlery and yell at the characters on screen. Others around me were indulging in similar behaviour, filling the cinema with the sound of heckles and chants, and laughing hysterically throughout. I was there to watch *The Room*, an independent movie directed, produced and distributed entirely by its star, Tommy Wiseau, for an alleged fee of around $6 million.[1] This was a movie that, upon its limited Los Angeles release in July 2003, was said to have been so terrible that it prompted 'most of its viewers to ask for their money back – before even 30

minutes [had] passed' (Foundas, 2003). Yet there I was, seven years later and several thousand miles away, having made a two-hour train journey and paid more than the price of a standard cinema ticket for the privilege of attending, all for a film that I owned on DVD, and had already seen several times before.

This particular screening was a sell out, meaning that I was there with over 200 others,[2] all appearing to share my enthusiasm. It is important to note that my personal 'fandom'[3] was not borne out an alternative or subversive reading of the film's narrative, nor was I attempting to re-appropriate it from its detractors.[4] In fact, I find it genuinely incompetent and poorly made in every sense. Rather, I was there to celebrate and take pleasure from its 'bad' qualities, to laugh *at* it rather than *with* it. Crucially though, I could easily have watched and enjoyed the film alone, and so my attendance that night was motivated by a desire to experience it in an entirely different context. It is this social context that will form the basis of this paper, as I analyse the behaviour and attitudes of the film's British cinema audiences.

By comparing and contrasting qualitative responses from one of the monthly screenings at the Prince Charles with a very different, one-off student screening at Christ's College, Cambridge, I aim to elucidate the significant role(s) played by the cinema audience in making *The Room* 'so bad it's good'. This is not to suggest that the 'bad', Camp or post-camp qualities noted by other observers (Klein, 2009; Semley, 2009) are not present, but that the audience's participatory behaviour is geared towards the provocation or production of a distinctly comic response. Furthermore, I demonstrate that comedy acts as the foundation for the audience to form temporary communities, with attendees collectively displaying a strong pedagogical imperative that works to delineate 'right' and 'wrong' ways to behave during screenings. Audiences collectively but unconsciously establish etiquette and social norms, resulting in the creation of a comedy experience that is far removed from the experience of watching the film alone.

## Method

The audience participation that takes place at the film's theatrical screenings has understandably resulted in a great deal of media attention, with this behaviour often serving as a starting point for journalists' reviews and articles (Collis, 2008a; Tobias, 2009; Goodwin, 2009; Rinaldi, 2011). Such accounts of the film have hitherto presented an overly simplistic and homogenised view of its audiences as 'rowdy repeat viewers' (Rose, 2009: G2). As Peter Rinaldi surmises, 'It seems like the film world is split between people that haven't heard of *The Room* and obsessive fans that have seen it many times, and not much in between' (2011). While this may be true in the United States (and without empirical research, we cannot be sure that it is), my research into the film's British audiences suggests that this is not only a false assumption, but that the 'in between' audiences are in fact

central to understanding how watching the film becomes a comedy experience, particularly in the theatrical context.

This article is based on data collected from two separate screenings in November and December 2010, combining observations of group behaviour with qualitative survey and interview responses from members of both audiences.[5] Ninety attendees initially agreed to participate, of which thirty-four completed the online survey – thirteen from Cambridge and twenty-one from London. Eight respondents (three from Cambridge, five from London) then indicated that they were willing to discuss their answers in more detail, and were interviewed over the phone. In all cases, interview questions acted as an extension of the survey, allowing respondents to elaborate on what they had already told me, as well as providing more scope for addressing any contradictions or ambiguity in their answers.

It should be stressed that the research presented here should by no means be seen as a complete portrait of *The Room*'s British audiences. After all, only two screenings are covered, with my samples representing only 10-20% of the total audience at each site.[6] Moreover, the stark differences in behaviour between the two screenings should reinforce the difficulty in extrapolating my findings. In fact, it is this unpredictability that appears to keep the more experienced 'fans' coming back. As three such attendees worded it:

> I wasn't sure the second time round [at the cinema] how much I would enjoy it having seen the film so many times before, but the audience – and in particular the regulars – know the film so well that there's always a new joke or take on a scene. The hecklers innovate the viewing experience – like I say, it's always in flux. (Michael, London)[7]

> Interestingly, all 3 screenings I've been to have provoked different laughter at different times – there are the usual things that people go crazy for ('Oh hi mark!') but sometimes people will be really taken by the laborious establishing shots, other times it'll be the Jonny Peter conversation, and so on. I'd seen it too many times before to be swayed on my favourite parts, but it's interesting to see how a collective appreciates it each time. (Dillon, London)

> Every screening I hear something new, and hear jokes evolve over the course of the year. (Josh, London)

If the participatory behaviour that characterises these screenings is so unpredictable, even to those who know the film and its 'fans' extremely well, then it makes more sense to look into the 'how' and 'why' as opposed to the 'what' of their actions. As such, the aim of this article is not to construct a catch-all model of *The Room*'s British audiences.[8] Rather, it asks how individual members view themselves in relation to others inside the cinema

auditorium, and how they respond to the behaviour they overhear or see. It is research that is best suited to the analysis of detailed qualitative data, as opposed to the statistical analysis of a larger sample. Although some behaviour has become ritualised, and there now exists an increasingly extensive array of heckles and that can be chosen from, on what basis do attendees at a given screening – either as individuals or as a group – privilege some over others?

At the time of writing, the Prince Charles Cinema – situated close to Trafalgar Square, London – represents the only location in the United Kingdom to host regular screenings of *The Room*. These are held in the 285-seat auditorium (the largest of the cinema's two screens) on the first Friday of every month, and according to staff, 'for the most part … have been selling out' (e-mail to the author, 7 June 2011). As an independent cinema that receives no public funding, formerly 'a film-house of ill repute', and one that relies on 'a loyal base of regular customers' (Anon., 2011), it would be difficult to find a location that was better suited to hosting this film. The original plan for this project was to base my research entirely around the screenings at the Prince Charles. However, upon learning of a one-off screening in Cambridge (hosted by Christ's College film society), I saw the smaller scale involved as an ideal opportunity for a pilot scheme that would prepare me for a more detailed analysis of the screenings at the Prince Charles. As it happened, Cambridge represented such a contrast to the experience I was already familiar with (both in terms of what I had experienced as a fan in July 2010, and what I had read about the film's American audiences), that it almost immediately pointed me towards several of the issues I raise in this paper. While there were notable similarities between the two audiences, their respective behaviour appeared to be in some way tied to their familiarity with the film. The Cambridge attendees' uncertainty in how, when or why certain rituals should be performed thus belied their palpable enthusiasm for participation.

In order to explain the differences between the two screenings, we need to trace how attendees' reading(s) of the film evolved, from having no knowledge at all, through to forming expectations, acting on a desire to see it, and finally to becoming a part of its cinema audience. The survey and interview questions that I devised were geared towards answering such questions, and beyond basic demographic data, fell into the following categories:

1. Initial discovery: How did you come to see or hear about *The Room*? What, if anything, did you know about it before watching?
2. Paratextual and Extratextual consumption: What role, if any, did paratextual and extratextual materials (e.g. reviews, trailers, clips uploaded to YouTube etc.) play in your consumption of the film? Has this changed at all since seeing it?
3. Expectations: What were you expecting from the film? To what extent were those expectations met?

4.  Contextual consumption: What made you want to watch *The Room* at a theatrical screening, as opposed to watching it in a more private setting, either alone or with a small group of friends?
5.  Group dynamic: To what extent did the behaviour of the audience (particularly its participatory nature) impact upon your enjoyment of the film? What is your opinion of the other people who attend these screenings of *The Room*?

Although recent years have seen the value of aca-fandom called into question (see for example, Tait, 2010), I also made the decision to embrace autoethnography and incorporate introspective analysis into my work. Since the purpose of this paper is to explain how audiences learn to read and respond to *The Room* in very particular ways, scrutinising my personal journey towards becoming a 'fan' seems highly useful. Following the lead of Henry Jenkins, I believe that writing 'as a fan about fan culture … facilitates certain understandings and forms of access impossible through other positionings' (1992: 6). On a practical level, Jonathan Gray has also argued that his research into *The Simpsons* fans was assisted by his own fandom, which enabled him to shift his role 'from student-with-recorder-and-questions to fellow-*Simpsons*-watcher', and allowed his interviewees to talk in 'a considerably more relaxed manner' (2006: 121).

My method for conducting this research was also heavily influenced by Will Brooker's study of *Star Wars* fans, in which he analyses the behaviour of fans under different viewing conditions; namely, watching alone versus watching in a group (2002: 29-78). One of the questions I was most keen to ask my research subjects was why the prospect of watching *The Room* in a cinema appealed to them, when they could conceivably have watched it in the comfort of their own home, either alone or with a small group of friends. Brooker's case study of group viewings makes for some fascinating insights into the social component of fandom, particularly in the sense that he is a 'newcomer to the group, learning [their] rules and playing [their] game' (60). The application of Brooker's work to my own involves the analysis of qualitative responses from my research subjects, as well as observations of group behaviour, and self-analysis. When in the company of *The Room*'s audiences, I was careful to modify my own behaviour slightly, lest I interfere with the 'organic' production of their behaviour. There were however several moments, particularly when my research reached the interview stage, when I slipped from my researcher sensibility and allowed the conversation to drift tangentially to the discussion of favourite scenes, and in some cases even recommending other films to watch. That I did so was less to do with my (genuine) love for the movie, and more a testament to the culture of participation that seems to surround it.

## Categorising *The Room*
The transformative impact of these audiences and their participatory behaviour becomes all the more noticeable when one considers the film's plot. Ostensibly a romantic drama, *The*

*Room* tells the story of Johnny (Wiseau), a kind-hearted San Franciscan banker whose life falls apart after his fiancée, Lisa (Juliette Danielle), begins an affair with his best friend, Mark (Greg Sestero). Heartbroken after being betrayed by his two closest friends, and overcome with grief, Johnny eventually commits suicide by shooting himself in the head. The disparity between the 'ordinariness' of *The Room*'s narrative and the unusual behaviour of its 'fans' draws attention to just how problematic it can be to define 'cult' films through a focus on the film text itself. Jeffrey Sconce admits as much when attempting to define a subset of 'cult' that he terms 'paracinema':

> As a most elastic textual category, paracinema would include entries from such seemingly disparate subgenres as 'badfilm', splatterpunk, 'mondo' films, sword and sandal epics, Elvis flicks, government hygiene films, Japanese monster movies, beach-party musicals, and just about every other historical manifestation of exploitation cinema from juvenile delinquency documentaries to soft-core pornography (1995: 372).

Sconce adds that paracinema should accordingly be seen as more of a 'reading protocol' than a distinct group of films (*ibid*). J.P. Telotte makes a similar point, arguing that 'many of the elements that link such disparate films as *Casablanca* (1942), *Rebel without a Cause* (1955), *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), and *Liquid Sky* (1983) fall outside genre study's normal focus on plot, setting, character type, and theme' (1991: 6). He goes on to call for a move 'beyond the purely textual to include the audience and its seemingly unreasonable "love" for these films' (7). Such an analysis feels particularly appropriate for a paper on *The Room*, which, aside from some soft-core sex scenes, appears to have very little in common with other cult movies, even those considered 'so bad they're good'. How then did *The Room* come to be placed in this category?

One of the factors that was absolutely central to *The Room*'s growth in reputation towards the end of the 2000s, was that it underwent a process of legitimation before spreading outside of Los Angeles. When Clark Collis for example wrote a follow-up article in response to the success of his first (2008a) piece for *Entertainment Weekly*, he summarised the film in the following terms:

> Long story short, this love triangle drama is beloved by Hollywood comedians – including Paul Rudd, David Cross, and Jonah Hill – for the project's so-bad-it's-hilarious nature. The [original] article made clear that *The Room* is awful, describing it as 'one of the worst movies ever made' and quoting one film lecturer who hailed it as 'The *Citizen Kane* of bad movies'. (2008b)

Endorsed by celebrities and academics alike then, Wiseau's movie is presented as 'the talk of L.A.' (Braund: 102), and a 'well-kept L.A.-only secret' (Tobias, 2009), positioning those

who *do* know about it as industry insiders, and/or knowledgeable film buffs. In fact, the celebrity endorsement for the film is almost exclusively through comedians, meaning that *The Room* comes across as not just insider knowledge, but an inside joke.[9] Such sentiments echoed by several of my research respondents, who spoke of the 'fun and witty' (Tim, London), 'educated cinephiles' (Chris, Cambridge), or even 'erudite' (Brian, London) members of the audience. Kate (Cambridge) tellingly added that, 'I first heard about [the film] from my sister, who is altogether much cooler and up to date on these things'. These examples clearly suggest that, for some people at least, there is a definite sense that those most familiar with the film are to be admired, and knowledge as power. Michael (London) summed this up by self-deprecatingly declaring, 'I enjoy the idea of participating in something with the rest of the audience, but I would probably not shout something new or on my own – I'm not funny enough for that.'

Similarly, the film's reputation as 'the *Citizen Kane* of bad movies' is cited frequently by journalists, justifying the tastes of its 'fans' by discursively positioning it alongside more 'legitimate' film culture. As Susan Sontag puts it, 'Camp asserts that good taste is not simply good taste; that there exists, indeed, a good taste of bad taste' (2008: 52). Matt Hills would agree, arguing that,

> paracinema can be and has been revalued as film art by placing it in direct cultural proximity to films already deemed aesthetically (and legitimately) valuable. Again, this should remind us that trash film culture often resembles legitimate film culture, especially in its reliance on notions of film art and authorship. (2007: 221)[10]

Accordingly, *The Room* has over time developed a reputation for being something 'more' than a poorly made film. In the words of the poster that hangs outside the Prince Charles Cinema, it is in fact, 'The best worst film ever made.'

In order to understand how the audience's 'unreasonable love' can be constructed, and what might be required for a cult 'reading protocol' to make a comedy out of a drama, we first need to examine current definitions of comedy. Since the word 'good' in 'so bad it's good' is almost exclusively used to refer to how humorous something is, as opposed to any other laudable artistic qualities, to what extent is it appropriate to describe *The Room* as a comedy?

Geoff King begins his book on film comedy by noting the term's similarities with such forms as 'the horror and the "weepie": defined to a significant extent according to the emotional reaction it is intended to provoke' (2002: 2). Brett Mills hints at similar ideas when describing the distinction between comedy and humour, which he argues is based around notions of production and intention: 'humour is something which can exist both within and

outside of media, whereas comedy suggests material whose primary purpose is one of funniness, usually created by specific people with that aim, and understood as so by audiences' (2005: 17). *The Room*, however, represents something of a challenge to this definition, having been the subject of much debate in terms of the intent behind it. Tommy Wiseau consistently claims in interviews that 'everything that you see and experience … was done meticulously',[11] and that he made the film 'to provoke the audience' (Bissell, 2011: 64) and 'for people to see it and have fun with it and interact with it' (Angus, 2009: PM7). James MacDowell rightly points out that, however unknowable the 'truth' of Wiseau's authorial intentions may be, the appeal of *The Room* necessarily requires such a judgement to be made:

> We absolutely *must* assume that *The Room* wasn't intended to be a self-parodic comedy in order to laugh at it in the way that we do. This should by rights make us revisit this most fundamental issue for criticism: to what extent can we presume to prove or infer intention, given that we clearly and necessarily *do* so regularly? (2011: original emphasis).

Many of my respondents suggested that, at least in the case of *The Room*, the audience plays a significant part in this inference. Michael (London) for example wrote that the film 'feels more like a deliberate comedy in the cinema than it would watching it on your own, where you pick up on the nuances that make it so spectacularly shit'. This view is actually at odds with the vast majority of other responses I received, with most feeling that the film would be far less enjoyable alone. However, what it points towards is the role of the audience in judging intention, and the importance of this judgement in the construction of comedy. If, to restate Mills' definition, comedy is 'material whose primary purpose is one of funniness' and is 'created by specific people with that aim' (2005: 17), then do *The Room*'s audiences complicate this? Is comedy always bound by the materiality of a text?

This is an important question, and one that King offers a potential answer to. He notes that because any genre can potentially be treated as a comedy, the term is perhaps best thought of as 'a mode, rather than as a genre' (2002: 2). As he puts it, comedy 'can only be understood in relation to a number of specific contexts, including many of our basic expectations and assumptions about the world around us' (4). King goes on to argue that 'comedy tends to involve departures … from what are considered to be the "normal" routines of life of the social group in question,' and 'can take various forms, including incongruity and exaggeration' (5). Although most writing about *The Room* to date has made a point of mentioning the zeal of its theatrical screenings, its appeal is almost always implicitly located in its textual incongruity. Amanda Ann Klein for example notes that 'the movie violates almost every rule of storytelling' (2009), while Steve Rose describes it as 'a movie whose transcendent awfulness has made it a cult phenomenon and an audience-participation fixture along the lines of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*' (2009: 2). *The Room*

in other words departs so constantly and exaggeratedly from established cinematic and narrative conventions, that the incongruity between what we expect and what we actually see becomes humorous.

There is however a notable incongruity between the behaviour of these audiences and those that one generally encounters in a cinema. To what extent, then, can this social incongruity be said to result in humour or comedy? A number of recent news stories have accompanied a growing discourse surrounding the etiquette of the contemporary cinemagoer. BBC film critic Mark Kermode has been a major proponent of this movement, releasing his own 'Moviegoers Code of Conduct', in which he derides anybody who uses a mobile phone, eats, talks, arrives late, and a number of other supposed taboos (Kermode, 2010). Publications such as *Total Film* (2008a), *Cinematical* (Kelly, 2007) and *NME* (Nicholls, 2009) have covered similar topics in recent years, accompanied by an increase in reports of poor cinema etiquette leading to violence: In Britain, a teenager threw bleach over a woman during a *Harry Potter* film after she asked him to be quiet (Wainwright, 2009); In Latvia, a man was shot dead for eating popcorn too loudly during *Black Swan* (Shoard, 2011); in Philadephia, another man was shot (though not fatally) for talking during *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (Anon, 2008b). A less extreme incident still managed to generate considerable debate on the subject of cinema etiquette, when the Alamo Drafthouse in Austin, Texas, turned an expletive-ridden voicemail message from an angry customer into an anti-texting advert (Child, 2011).

While these incidents should not be seen as typical problems of the contemporary cinemagoer, the considerable rise in the number of these stories (or at least those being reported) suggests a growing sense of how to appropriately conduct oneself when going to watch a film. The participatory behaviour that takes place during *The Room* is thus all the more remarkable for continuing to grow in spite of this discourse, a peculiarity which a number of my research respondents explicitly drew attention to:

> There's something very liberating about being able to shout in an environment where you are normally quiet (Roger, Cambridge).

> I can't normally stand it when people talk or make noise in the cinema, but this really enhances it. Almost more like going to a sporting event or a concert (Doug, London).

> Normally, I'm the sort of person that loathes even talking during films … but in this case it only made it better. I threw spoons, shouted quotations and so on, but not knowing the usual rituals that well, followed the lead of others. Though I did so quite happily! (Chris, Cambridge)

While all three comments point out that they enjoyed the participatory behaviour they witnessed, their thoughts nevertheless serve to reinforce the abovementioned news stories. For them, any kind of noise or excessive movement would, under 'normal' circumstances, surely anger fellow cinemagoers. In order for a comedy experience to be created from the incongruity of this behaviour, the audience must have a very clear idea of what is expected of them.

## Great Expectations: Discovering *The Room*, and establishing preconceptions

Reflecting on my own experience of the film in relation to its media representation revealed some discrepancies between the two, and left me wondering to what extent I was a 'typical' fan, if such a thing even existed. How, for example, did most people find out about it in the first place? The Los Angeles premiere of *The Room* is said to have involved spotlights and Tommy Wiseau arriving by limousine, (Collis, 2008a), backed by a marketing campaign that included 'billboards along Sunset Boulevard, television spots and a glossy, commemorative book on the movie's making' (Foundas, 2003). Wiseau even submitted it, unsuccessfully, to the Academy Awards (Collis, 2008a; Jones, 2010). Yet the film escaped the attention of the media for a considerable amount of time, presumably as a result of its extremely limited distribution, negative early press, and poor box office performance (reported to have been $1,900 for a two-week run [Collis, 2008a]). Although *Variety* reported on its burgeoning cult reputation in April 2006, it was not until Clark Collis's *Entertainment Weekly* article in 2008 that the media's interest was noticeably piqued.

I had heard nothing of the film until October 2009, when a friend of mine, Dillon, posted the following message on my Facebook wall: 'I forgot to ask, did you ever watch that now infamous film *The Room*, aka "the best worst film ever made"? If not, download it from Pirate Bay. As in, right now. Type in "The Room Wiseau". I first saw it on my year [studying] in America [in 2006] and have been enraptured ever since.' He then included a link to the film's Wikipedia page, 'on the off chance that [I had] no idea what [he was] talking about'. To provide some context to this message, Dillon is a good friend and former housemate with whom I bonded primarily through our similar tastes in comedy. Since finishing University we have met up several times, but for the most part communicate with each other via Facebook, almost exclusively to share news, videos, quotes or clips that we think the other will find funny. His mention of having forgotten to ask me whether I had seen or heard of *The Room*, coupled with the insistence that I should watch it 'right now' implies a sense of urgency that stood out as unusual in relation to our typical correspondence.

Without explicitly describing the film as 'funny' or 'a comedy', Dillon positioned it as such through his choice of wording and decision to recommend it to me through our established comedy-sharing channel. Seen in this way, I had enough faith in his recommendation to do as he suggested, locate a peer-to-peer torrent and download the film. I was expecting

something along the lines of Arnold Schwarzenegger's movie debut, *Hercules in New York* (Arthur Allan Seidelman, 1969). Dillon and I shared a mutual affection for Schwarzenegger's early work, and had watched the film together as undergraduate housemates, laughing loudly at the terrible plot, script, acting, and special effects. This, my previous benchmark for how enjoyable a 'so bad it's good' film could be, was the point of reference that came immediately to mind.

His insistence that I download *The Room*, rather than merely suggesting I watch it, is also important. Firstly, it stresses the urgency behind his recommendation, since by following his advice it was possible for me to have been watching it within an hour of reading his message. His specifying of search terms also speeded up the process, helping me to circumvent any difficulties I might otherwise have faced in locating an appropriate torrent, especially given the potential ambiguity of the film's title to an internet search engine. Most importantly however, Dillon was effectively teaching me how to become as 'enraptured' as him, providing me with enough information to begin my journey into *Room* fandom. Thanks to him, I was not only convinced that I would enjoy it, but also had some sense of why I would enjoy it, as well as practical information that enabled me to locate a copy.

Crucially, the issue of downloading also highlights a practical stumbling block for UK residents who are keen to watch the film, in that its limited distribution has quite simply made it difficult to legally locate a copy. As Martin described his presence at the Christ's College screening, 'I had no other easily available way to see the film.' Although the Region 1 DVD (released in the USA on 17 December 2005) can be purchased online, to date there has been no mention of a Region 2 (i.e. European) release. The UK premiere took place at the Prince Charles Cinema on 24 July 2009, and has continued to be screened every month, with attendance high enough for the cinema to consider making it a fortnightly event.[12] Increasing the frequency of theatrical screenings (both at the Prince Charles and in other locations around the country) has undoubtedly facilitated access to the film for thousands of people, but piracy remains the only realistic option for anybody living outside of London. There is perhaps no greater example of this than the fact that the Christ's College's screening was in fact set up by Kate, who did so purely as a response to the difficulty in getting hold of a copy:

> [After a] mutual back-and-forthing of youtube clips I was determined to see the film, yet VERY disappointed to hear it was only shown in some pokey cinema in London a few times a year. I was still keen to go but never seemed to find anyone else who was able to come with me so [a friend] and I decided to screen it – even if no-one else came, we were sure we'd enjoy it all the same!

While the lengths Kate was prepared to go to in order to see the film are undoubtedly more extreme than most, her motivations for doing so are certainly not. As mentioned above, the

hyperbole and boisterous audience behaviour that have contributed to *The Room*'s reputation have effectively positioned it as one of the world's most enjoyable inside jokes; one that rewards attention to detail and repeat viewings.

As I approached students queuing before the Cambridge screening and began talking to them about the possibility of taking part in my research (asking only for their name and email address at that stage), I soon realised that only an incredibly small minority had actually seen *The Room* before. Of the thirteen attendees that responded to my survey questions, only two had seen it in its entirety, with the vast majority having seen nothing but a collection of YouTube clips to whet their appetite. While I had expected several first timers to be in attendance, I found the ratio highly surprising, in part because just four months earlier, I had witnessed for myself the 'veteran' levels of participation on display at the Prince Charles Cinema. Even when I returned to London for research purposes, I found that more than half of my respondents (twelve out of twenty-one) respondents there were first timers.

In spite of (or perhaps because of) everything I had read about the film and its cult following, I wrongly assumed that the vast majority of attendees would be repeat viewers who knew the film well enough to quote at will and participate actively. Instead, in both cases, a significant proportion of the audience was seeing it for the first time, suggesting that the participatory behaviour is based predominantly on following the lead of those with a more detailed knowledge of the text. At least three of the Cambridge students I approached actually told me that, although they were happy to take part in my research, they were unsure how valuable their comments would be, purely because they had not already seen the movie. It is not clear whether they had read anything specific about the 'rowdy repeat viewers' who the media report as being typical of frequenting screenings of *The Room*, but they nevertheless displayed some mild anxiety regarding their own status in relation to other 'fans'. While I return to ideas of inclusion and exclusion later in this paper, it is worth bearing in mind that even those attendees with a very limited knowledge of the film were aware, before they even entered the cinema, of the implicit pressure to fit in with the rest of the audience.

In terms of demographics, six of my Cambridge respondents were male, and seven female, with an age range of 18-25. The gender balance was less balanced in London however, where fifteen respondents were male and six female, and ages ranged from 17-46 (although the mean age was only slightly higher). The difference in respective age ranges is largely explained by the fact that the Cambridge screening was run by and for students, having been hosted by the Christ's College film society. The higher proportion of men at the Prince Charles, however, correlates with the lower proportion of first timers, meaning that repeat viewers among my respondents are statistically more likely to be male.[13] Word of mouth was by some distance the primary method of discovery, as was the case for approximately

two thirds of each audience (nine of thirteen in Cambridge, and thirteen of twenty-one in London).

YouTube clips also played a significant role for most people, generally being either the site where attendees discovered it, or their first port of call after having heard about it from a friend. By enabling users to 'like' or 'dislike' a clip, as well as by displaying its view count prominently below, certain videos are implicitly marked out as being the film's 'best' moments. Accordingly, this method of discovery effectively preempts a specific reading of the film by splitting it up into individual clips, and drawing attention to its textual incongruities and idiosyncrasies. As audience members variously described their YouTube use to me, several mentioned having watched some of the most 'infamous' (Alan; Dawn, both Cambridge), 'funniest' (Bob, London) or 'better bits' (Gareth, Cambridge), and in the words of Roger (Cambridge), 'made me aware of how bad it was, and gave me an expectation of the "catchphrases"'. Pam (London) spoke in similar terminology, labelling it 'very important' to her enjoyment of the film, and adding 'I saw some clips of it a lot of times before and almost knew them by heart so I could actually participate and understand in [sic] all the jokes and the comments people were making in the cinema.' By sharing these clips with friends via e-mail and social networking sites, this mode of consumption also enables users to extend the joke to other people should they choose to do so, inviting them to take pleasure from (or perhaps marvel at) the film's 'badness'.

In fact, by far one of the most important contextual factors of *The Room*'s reception is that the 'so bad it's good' tag dominates its critical reception to the point of being all but inescapable.[14] In her work on historical reception studies, Barbara Klinger argues in favour of a 'totalised' approach to film history, writing that 'exhaustiveness, while impossible to achieve, is necessary as an ideal goal' (1997: 108). Accordingly, while I cannot claim to have read every word that has been written or reported about *The Room*, I have endeavoured to seek out as much as possible. My background research eventually extended to scores of articles, blog posts, interviews, and video reports, from not just the United States and the United Kingdom, but to Canada and Australia, which have also played host to theatrical screenings of the film. It does not appear to be a coincidence that the only sources I came across that did *not* talk about Wiseau's film in terms of being 'so bad it's good' were also the earliest references I could find. The first was Scott Foundas' review in *Variety*, in which he noted the unusually negative audience reaction, and remarked upon the film's 'overall ludicrousness' and 'extreme unpleasantness' (2003). Interestingly, Joel Stein's article in the *Los Angeles Times* two years later was similarly scathing, despite also going into some detail about the 'cult' status and participatory behaviour that had become associated with it (2005: M2). Neither of these articles gives any indication that its incompetence might also be considered entertaining, providing the reader with no reason to seek the film out.

Since its cult reputation escalated in the late 2000s, *The Room* has become virtually impossible to discover outside of a 'so bad it's good' perspective. This is not to suggest that, stripped of YouTube clips or background information, the comedy element of the film disappears. Dillon for instance heard about *The Room* through a friend who told him 'nothing about it except that it was unmissable', while Julie (London) also knew nothing before going in, having attended largely for social reasons: 'Two of my friends are film buffs and if they suggest a film I go – I don't bother to ask about it as I like to be surprised.  So I mistakenly thought this was a serious arty film'. Tellingly however, Julie realised her 'mistake' as soon as she got to the cinema and 'encountered the excited atmosphere [which] was more like a football match than a film', eventually resulting in her evening being 'the most [she] had laughed at a film in a long time'. In other words, the audience's atypical behaviour instantly signaled incongruity and altered her expectations.

Dillon had a slightly different experience, 'realised what the joke was' after only a few minutes, and 'remained spellbound for the rest of the movie'. While he claims that his friend 'kept a straight face' and his 'moment of enlightenment came independently', he also added 'I remember finally looking over to [my friend] and he said something like, "I know, right?"' In other words, Dillon's 'independent' reading still required him to seek reassurances from his friend, lest he doubt what he was seeing and thinking. His reaction of course may also have been pre-empted or exaggerated partly by the 'unmissable' label ascribed to the film by his friend. Either way, his reaction was only possible in a private viewing with a friend who was unusually determined not to influence him in any way. Most viewers, it seems, are not presented with this opportunity.

In the months that followed *The Room*'s UK premiere, The Prince Charles actually handed out plastic spoons and a 'Viewer's Guide' to every attendee, providing the uninitiated and experienced attendees alike with the necessary materials and information to mimic the participatory behaviour seen in the film's American screenings.[15] A cinema employee told me that they stopped distributing the 'rule' sheets because after months of having screened it, 'everybody knows what to do now … and most people bring their own spoons.' One could be forgiven for thinking this is the case after a cursory glance at one of the Prince Charles screenings, but my research indicates that a significant proportion of the audience arrive at the cinema with only a very vague idea of how they are expected to behave.

Most articles about *The Room* are thus guilty of taking for granted or simplifying the behaviour of its cinema audiences. Yes, there are rituals, some being more common than others, but what journalists fail to acknowledge all too often is that the performance of these rituals actually plays out as a (mostly) unconscious negotiation between the individual members of the audience. Media coverage and YouTube clips have worked to position various scenes, heckles, chants and shouts as high points of the film's theatrical screenings,

but in order to account for the fact that no two screenings are alike, we must turn our attention to the specific behaviour of my two case study audiences.

## Laughing Stock: Participation, community, and the importance of laughter

The idiosyncratic audience behaviour that has come to be associated with *The Room* has undoubtedly played an important role in its cult 'success'. Almost every article that has been written about the film since 2005 has made a point of listing some of its perceived shortcomings, yet the concurrent focus on audiences throwing spoons or quoting along means that its reputation cannot wholly be put down to its aesthetic 'badness'. Although much of the ritualised behaviour of its theatrical screenings relates directly to on-screen events, the extent to which that behaviour is required to correspond with the needs and views of individual attendees has so far been overlooked.

As Martin Barker and Kate Brooks have argued, 'the very term "audience" is misleading because it homogenises what is in fact very diverse' (1998: 11), and this is precisely what has happened in relation to *The Room*'s audiences. Far from being a homogenised, unified group of cinemagoers with established 'rituals', the participatory behaviour that takes place at *The Room*'s theatrical screenings is always the result of negotiation and compromise. Each time the film is screened in a cinema, individual attendees (almost always in small groups) effectively become part of a temporary community, one that exists only in that place and until the cinema has emptied. Nancy Baym has observed that, in addition to a physical or metaphorical sense of shared space, the concept of community 'can also be found in the habitual and usually unconscious practices – routinised behaviours – that group members share' (2010: 77). It is the establishment of these social norms (and their impliations) that will comprise the remainder of this paper, as I look in more detail at how the behaviour and attitudes of individuals contribute to the construction of a collective comedy experience.

My first ('fan'-motivated) trip to the Prince Charles in had been an eye opener to say the least. Attendees' contributions to the ongoing audience dialogue were all but continuous, and stretched far beyond the spoon throwing and quoting that I had previously read about, demonstrating an extremely detailed knowledge of the film. The spoon throwing in this case began before the film had even begun, in response to a spoon being spotted during an advert for Kellogg's Crunchy Nut Corn Flakes. Cambridge on the other hand were far quieter, expressing themselves largely through laughter, while at the same time making some effort to participate in some of the rituals that have contributed to the film's reputation. For the most part, Cambridge appeared fully aware that they were expected to behave a certain way, but lacked the familiarity with the film and its cult traditions to perform them 'accurately'. The two audiences thus came across as comparatively 'veteran' (London) and 'rookie' (Cambridge).[16]

As a response to the framed photographs of cutlery that can sometimes be seen in the background of scenes, the throwing of plastic spoons in many ways can be seen to exemplify the level of familiarity and attention to detail so often associated with these audiences. But what are we to make of the countless host cinemas that give out spoons to every attendee as they enter the auditorium? And what of the first time viewers who take spoons with them in anticipation, having read about it in a newspaper or online article, despite not knowing their significance? It is this kind of behaviour that I witnessed most prominently in Cambridge, where the audience intermittently threw spoons with (apparently) little sense of when or why this should be done. Their desire to be a part of a community, however temporarily, was clear, with many of their comments reflecting a desire to do things the 'correct' way.

One common ritual, for instance, is traditionally performed while Johnny sets up some audio equipment to secretly record evidence of Lisa's infidelity. During this scene, sections of the audience often hum or sing the theme music from *Mission: Impossible*, in an ironic mocking of his attempt to use technology to assist his relationship problems. About half way through this sequence, which up until that point had been met with silence by the Cambridge audience, I overheard a comment from the row behind me, 'What is it we're meant to do here? We're supposed to sing something… Oh wait, it's the *Mission: Impossible* song isn't it? How does it go though?' Eventually, the attendee remembered the correct melody, began to sing it, and others immediately laughed and joined in, suggesting that the film's audience participation relies on only a small number of attendees being confident enough in their knowledge to encourage others to join in. As Kate (Cambridge) tellingly put it, 'I think I am probably more willing to see the film again as it was such fun! … especially now I know what I'm meant to be shouting!!!'

Observers in the British and American media were quick to compare *The Room* with The *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman, 1975), but solely in terms of its cult following as opposed to any of their formal qualities. Scott Tobias for example describes the film as 'the first true successor to the *Rocky Horror* throne' (2009), while Clark Collis points out the similarities in 'rowdy, strange behaviour' (2008a). Indeed, audiences for both movies habitually engage in a dialogue with their respective films, quote and sing along, and in some cases come dressed up as their favourite characters, or bring props to the cinema to use as part of their 'performance'. But there is one key feature of *The Room*'s screenings that is all too often overlooked, despite being by far the most common, most audible, and in fact the most defining feature of the audience behaviour I observed: laughter.

As Brett Mills rightly points out, it is important to draw a distinction between the noise we refer to as 'laughter' and the common interpretation of that noise, with a great deal of research having shown it to represent 'a far more complex and subtle interaction than simply a response to comic stimulus' (2005: 13). He goes on to argue that the use of the

laugh track in the television sitcom 'can be seen to function less as a generic signal and more as demonstrating some kind of social unity in the audience that consumes it; it suggests that everyone finds this funny' (14). Clearly there are a number of significant differences between the use of a laugh track in a sitcom and the laughter of a cinema audience, not only in terms of where the laughter is coming from but the intention behind it, its relationship to the text, and how the sound of laughter subsequently positions its audience.

Jacob Smith notes for instance that the live studio audience has often been contrasted with the laugh track as 'an index of authentic presence'; a problematic comparison 'because the reactions of the studio audience are rarely free from manipulation' (2005: 38). By extension, however, this suggests that the laughter of a cinema audience is inherently more 'authentic' than either canned studio laughter or the recorded studio audience, which itself is a problematic implication. In his scientific study of laughter, Robert Provine writes that, 'When we hear laughter we tend to laugh in turn, producing a behavioural chain reaction that sweeps through a group, creating a crescendo of jocularity or ridicule. The contagious laughter response is immediate and involuntary' (2000: 129). In the case of *The Room* then, it is likely that the laughter of a small minority (combined with the noticeably excitable atmosphere at all three screenings I have personally attended) would be enough to provoke others in the audience to laugh.

One of the overriding arguments of this article is that, regardless of what Tommy Wiseau was hoping or attempting to achieve when making *The Room*, the participatory culture that has developed around it specifically works towards the production of a shared reading. Viewers are encouraged to spot and laugh at so many mistakes and idiosyncrasies that the 'so bad it's good' reading is not only privileged, but also rewarded. At one point during the Cambridge screening, two male attendees in front of me spent at least ten minutes intermittently laughing at what they assumed to be incompetent shot composition. Gesturing histrionically towards the screen, the two men drew attention to the characters' unusually high positions within the frame. From my own knowledge of the film, I knew that this 'mistake' was in fact the product of a misaligned projector, but other attendees nearby picked up on the men's gesturing, laughing in turn. Being finely attuned to the 'so bad it's good' mindset enabled this section of the audience to seamlessly conflate text and context, and in a way that benefited others as well as themselves.

As one might expect, however, the attempt to spread jokes to others in the audience is not always successful. As Billy (Cambridge) told me, 'The film was so bad that it was good, but people seemed too prepared for that, laughing at parts that weren't actually funny, and excessive groaning at the sex scenes.' David (London) also objected to the efforts of some people to actively enforce a particular reading, even though it was one he ultimately agreed with, arguing that 'anything can sound bad if you're determined to mock it', but 'it really is that bad and deserves the mocking.' These comments suggest an unease among some

members of the audience, who resented 'being told when to laugh', a complaint that audiences have frequently been attributed to the use of laugh tracks in television sitcom (See Kalviknes Bore, 2011). Mills argues that regardless of its perceived authenticity, however, the laugh track draws attention to the inclusive or exclusive role that comedy reception can play:

> By placing laughter at jokes, a comic moment is signalled as such even if an audience member watching the programme at home doesn't find it funny. In doing so, the sitcom signals a distinction between that which is and isn't funny … In this way, the sitcom attempts to close down alternative readings of its content, by suggesting that if you're not laughing at one of its jokes, then you're the only one (2005: 51).

In the same way, while individual attendees are of course free to laugh or not laugh as they please, the fervent participatory behaviour of *The Room*'s audiences effectively positions anybody not taking part as an outsider. Natalie Haynes implicitly stresses the importance of fitting in at these screenings when she writes that, 'If you want to go along, don't forget to take plastic spoons with you. Then, when the audience shouts "Spooooon" and begins hurling cutlery at the screen, you won't feel left out' (2011). For Haynes then, the experience of watching *The Room* in a cinema is less about the spectacle of badness offered by the film, or the spectacle of the audience's behaviour, but more about conformity (in the non-pejorative sense).

This idea was echoed by several of my respondents, who lauded the audience for creating 'a sense of community' (Jennifer, London). Alan (Cambridge) even went as far as saying 'I think I feel better wasting my life in company watching this film than on my own at a computer. It was a bit like a support group: audience reactions helped us get through it,' and 'the fact that others saw it made it less bad that I did.'

Conformity in this context then acts as a tool for encouraging and justifying tastes that may otherwise be deemed illegitimate. This is consistent with Platow et al.'s research into the effects of social influence on laughter, which showed that, rather than being an automatic process, 'people actively attend to *who* is laughing, and laugh a lot themselves only when they have heard fellow in-group members laughing' (2005: 548. Emphasis added). By collectively fostering a sense of community full of like-minded people, *The Room*'s British audiences improve the likelihood of each heckle or chant provoking laughter. Positive participation cements an attendee's position within that community, and increases the scope for future participation, creating a mutually beneficial cycle of social interaction based on comedy.

In light of these comments, we should not be surprised that the social appeal of the screenings becomes more pronounced as attendees return for repeat viewings. Eight out of my thirteen research subjects from the Cambridge screening, where textual familiarity was low, stated that the film itself was their primary motivation for being there, although six of these also expressed a desire to witness the audience behaviour they had read or been told about. In London however, attendees gave a far wider range of answers when asked to explain 'What made [them] want to watch *The Room* at a [theatrical] screening … as opposed to watching it in a more private setting?' The most popular response among Prince Charles respondents was the desire to witness the audience's behaviour above anything else (ten out of twenty-one), with four people stressing social reasons, such as 'an easy way to introduce friends to the film' (Michael) or 'I prefer watching films in the cinema as opposed to privately' (Emma). Doug extended his thoughts regarding his theatrical experience to his consumption of the film more generally, stating,

> Sharing the clips online has been a really communal thing - finding different clips, sharing them, noticing different things each time you watch them and pointing stuff out to each other. The comments below the clips are some of the funniest I've seen on YouTube. Stuff just tends to be funnier when there's [sic] more people around to share it, you spark each other off. It's quite rare I think that someone would burst out laughing hysterically if they were sat in their flat on their own, so seeing the room en mass [sic] with fellow fans seemed the only way to enjoy it.

What these comments hint at is the social function that *The Room* serves for many attendees, and some of the ways in which the temporary community established within the cinema space works to enhance everybody's experience of the film. The fact that, practical considerations aside, so many people are keen to see it in a cinema as opposed to simply downloading or watching it on DVD, also means that the audience has a collective responsibility for the enjoyment of everybody there.

Contrary to the media's view of the film's audiences, many of the people who attend these theatrical screenings do so with only a very vague sense of what to expect. Often attracted by the stories they have read or been told about the audience participation, newcomers to the film are effectively in a position where they must rely upon more knowledgeable attendees to provide some of their entertainment. Interestingly, this is also the case for the more experienced attendees, who know the film so well that most of their pleasure comes from hearing new heckles or observing other people's reactions to certain scenes. Everybody, in other words, is potentially responsible for the enjoyment of everybody else. David (London) indicated as much in his interview, in which he said that he deliberately participated with a little more enthusiasm when attending with friends he had introduced to the film, anxious that they enjoyed a film that he had recommended they see.

In the London screening that I attended for research purposes, I witnessed a more explicit demonstration of where the responsibility for enjoyment lies during these screenings. A number of successive projector failures occurred less than ten minutes into the film at the Prince Charles, resulting in an extended period of waiting with no film. After some people began to act restlessly, several audience members took it upon themselves to entertain others. Among the most popular examples, judging by the amount of laughter it generated, was the use of a quotation from later in the film to refer to the ongoing delay, Johnny's 'In a few minutes, bitch!' A male towards the front of the auditorium even began playing a digital copy of the film on his iPhone, holding it aloft for the benefit of those behind him. In both of these cases, the attendee was rewarded with laughter from surrounding patrons, indicating a system whereby fan cultural capital (see Fiske, 2008) can be earned based on their level of participation. As one Cambridge attendee near to me whispered to his friend, after shuffling to the front of the screen to retrieve huge piles of plastic cutlery, 'If spoons are currency, I'm a fucking millionaire!'

Symbolising both the attention to filmic detail and the somewhat eccentric participation of its audiences, this attendee's spoon metaphor is a rather neat way of thinking about how fan cultural capital is earned in this context. Those who take spoons into the cinema contribute in several ways. Performing the spoon-throwing ritual at the appropriate times not only entertains others in the audience (only one of my thirty-four research participants responded negatively), but it also helps 'rookie' attendees to learn the ritual for themselves. Secondly, while spoons are generally aimed towards the cinema screen, few will make it far enough, instead falling on or near other attendees and providing them with the opportunity to participate by throwing spoons for themselves.

Finally, however, spoon throwing also represents the potential for knowledge to be misappropriated, since the desire to take part frequently seems to supersede the details or significance of doing so. Nathan Hunt has argued that in-depth knowledge of a particular text can be used as 'a form of cultural capital with fandom', working to 'define and police the borders of fandom' while at the same time 'producing, maintaining and negotiating hierarchies within fandom' (2003: 187). While this may be true to some extent in the context of *The Room*, this is not as simple as demonstrating that you have more knowledge than others around you. As Nancy Baym points out, 'normative standards always implicate power structures' (2010: 80), with power in this case relating to the audience's collective experience of the film.

One of Cambridge's female attendees found this out to her detriment, when she shouted out, 'I put my cancer upon you!' The line is traditionally shouted in response to one of the characters, Claudette (Lisa's mother), touching her daughter on the nose, and refers to a later scene in which she nonchalantly announces that she has breast cancer, a potentially

major subplot which is casually dismissed by her daughter and never mentioned again. It is a well-established audience ritual that I had previously heard at the Prince Charles Cinema, and appears in several YouTube clips of theatrical screenings. Performed in the midst of the 'rookie' Cambridge audience, however, where the girl was apparently the only person present who knew the ritual, her line fell flat, receiving no laughs or acknowledgement of any kind. Despite there being several other opportunities throughout the film to shout the line again, she neglected to do so, demonstrating the importance of laughter as an indicator of fan cultural capital, but also drawing attention to the potential embarrassment of failing to make people laugh. Silence (or shushing, which often occurs before certain 'favourite' scenes) has the power to mark out particular comments or behaviour as taboo, providing a clear indication that they did not add to the comedy experience being sought by the group.

As a more extreme example, a number of my London respondents made reference to one particularly vocal attendee (hereafter PVA), a young male who was clearly very keen to flaunt his knowledge of the film. Almost all of his early comments, which were frequent from the beginning, were met with enthusiastic laughter, but the persistence of his commentary provoked a great deal of anger as time went on. Expletives were directed at him at least four times, with other members of the audience shouting, 'We don't need a fucking narration!' or more pointedly telling him to 'Shut the fuck up!' Although Michael described him as 'on form all night', he appeared to be the man's only defender, with all the other respondents who mentioned him doing so because they found him 'incredibly annoying' (Brian), and because he seemed 'like he had all his heckles and shouts pre-prepared' (Doug). Bob felt as though PVA 'was more about how many laughs [he] could get rather than the film itself', and Clarke was particularly disapproving, grouping him with what he described as 'purists [who] will wave their cocks about for hours over who can quote the most'. Although he enjoyed the experience of watching the film with an audience, Clarke went on to say that:

> The fans are more dedicated than I realised. Some are just incredibly irritating and seem desperate to prove they are the biggest fan by picking out things in the film that no one else has noticed, or giving a running commentary throughout. I don't see why this is necessary, as far as I'm aware, there is no badge that can be posted or stamp of approval garnered for devotion to Mr Wiseau. Unless he starts a cult. Then those guys are first to the punch bowl.

As noted above, the audience behaviour on display differs significantly between each screening of *The Room*, implying that, at least in theory, there is scope to say or shout almost anything. The example of PVA however, clearly seen as unfavourable despite his detailed knowledge of the film, draws attention to the fine line that exists between the acquisition and loss of fan cultural capital. In his analysis of watching *Star Wars* in a group, Will Brooker concludes that:

> The game [i.e. the unspoken pursuit of collective enjoyment] depends on all the players being on a level as good amateurs; a newcomer who could recite every single word from the screenplay, and did so, would be regarded like a professional soccer player steaming onto a kids' pitch and racking up twenty goals in the first five minutes. There is a delicate balance between displaying skills of imitation and textual knowledge, and showing off. […] To quote continuously, however accurately, would seem boorish and arrogant (2002: 59).

I have already demonstrated that *The Room*'s audiences do not rely on 'all players being on a level as good amateurs', since twenty-three of my thirty-four respondents had never even seen the film before attending a theatrical screening. Brooker's thoughts here nevertheless go some way to explaining the negative reaction to PVA, whose behaviour was eventually interpreted as self-centred and intrusive, rather than something that benefited others in the audience.

PVA represents something of an anomaly however, because one of the interesting aspects of these screenings in terms of group dynamics is the anonymity provided by the darkness of the cinema auditorium. Fan cultural capital can certainly be acquired, but it can only ever be temporary. As soon as the lights dim and the film begins to play, an attendees' only recognisable feature is his or her voice, combined with their vague position in the audience. No matter how much a person may participate, their capital will reset to zero as soon as the lights come up, the light ironically rendering them indistinguishable from the other patrons exiting the cinema. Similarly, there is nothing to prevent somebody from attending and sitting in total silence for the duration of the movie, behaviour that might seem strange in the context of a small group viewing. The fact that attendees do participate, however, and to such an extent, is a testament to the group's success in delivering pleasure. The only way that reputation acquired during the screening can be taken outside of the cinema is via the group of friends that attendees arrive with. Potentially, the cinema can act as a platform for one member of a group to demonstrate their ability to spread laughter outside of their friendship circle, but even by attending at all, attendees instantly acquire some fan cultural capital. By providing exposure to what is essentially a practical demonstration of the 'so bad it's good' reading protocol, such screenings offer 'fans' the opportunity to improve their own ability to spread the comedy experience to others.

It seemed to me during the London screening that the criticism received by PVA may also have been a response to his unnatural keenness to flaunt his educational capital. One heckle for example specifically mentioned Sigmund Freud, and he also referenced at least three different William Shakespeare plays, the most subtle of which (a quote from *Julius Caesar* about betrayal) he followed with a loud declaration of, 'That was a Shakespeare reference,

by the way!' By couching his interpretive competency in terms of more culturally 'legitimate' texts or authors, he appeared overly keen to elevate himself above the text, and by extension the rest of the audience. Moreover, the frequency of his heckles served to break the anonymity provided by the darkness of the cinema, with his voice acting as a reference point in identifying him to others. Individualised in a context that values the group as a whole, PVA gradually became something of a pariah, whose comments received considerably less laughter after he had been figuratively ostracised.

## Conclusion

Despite frequently being used as the starting point for media discussions of *The Room*, participatory audience behaviour has invariably been discussed as a fascinating but largely incidental product of the film's 'so bad it's good' qualities. What the research presented in this article demonstrates, however, is that the pleasures of 'so bad it's good' are only partly dependent upon textual 'badness'.[17] Through their atypical cinema behaviour, audiences collectively encourage each other to adopt a very particular reading protocol – one that identifies 'badness' specifically in order to locate humour in it. It is, to use James MacDowell and James Zborowski's words, 'a form of interpretative competence which values incompetence' (2011).

It is worth pointing out that the experience of seeing *The Room* in the cinema (as opposed to watching a DVD, pirated copy, alone or in small groups) has been privileged by 'fans', most media reports, and indeed by this study. Markus Wohlfeil and Susan Whelan have made a similar argument in relation to fandom more generally, which in their view has historically been guilty of ignoring the experience of individuals in favour of 'the social dynamics and symbolic relationships that consumers experience with other fans within their respective consumption subcultures' (2011). As my research suggests, however, although not everybody who takes pleasure from *The Room*'s 'badness' speaks positively about the experience of its theatrical screenings, the behaviour of the film's audiences in that context is indicative of its appeal more generally. This is, after all, a cult phenomenon that spread beyond the cinema primarily because attendees began to place so much value on extending the comedy experience to new audiences and new contexts.

As a cultural category, then, 'So bad it's good' (or SOBIG, to use Semley's abbreviation [2009: 8]) appears to be represent something of an intersection between comedy and the cult text, both of which are difficult to define purely in terms of traditional generic markers. In this case it is the audiences that serve as comedy mediators, drawing attention to 'funny' moments, as well as dictating the appropriate response(s). The temporary communities that emerge within the temporal and spatial confines of the theatrical screening place considerable value on the production of laughter, and punish those who are deemed to be contributing negatively, either through explicit (i.e. vocal) denigration or through silence. The effect of this behaviour is similar to that of a laugh track in a sitcom, providing visual

and aural cues that work together to define what the comedy experience should be, as well as establishing notions of inclusivity and exclusivity.

Although few attendees at these screenings display any anxiety about their 'enjoyment' of something they consider to be 'bad', the pedagogical imperative that implicitly runs through the film's 'fan' discourse suggests an urge to spread word to as many people as possible. This appears to be part of an unconscious process of legitimation, since as Christine (Cambridge) puts it, 'if you think something is really badly acted or shot, you still seek recognition from other people in the audience that it is actually really bad, rather than you just thinking it's bad'. As such, audience behaviour that is comedy-motivated, such as heckling, riffing (see McWilliams and Richardson, 2011), cosplay, or the use of props, serves several important functions within the theatrical (or even small group) context:

1.  Potentially provides entertainment in its own right; a joke that subverts, embellishes, or in some way alters the original text.
2.  Impacts upon the fan cultural capital of the 'performer', either positively or negatively. In a theatrical context, this capital exists only as long as the film is playing, but by reinforcing the behaviour through laughter (or rejecting it through silence), that attendee is encouraged towards (or dissuaded from) the pursuit of similar behaviour in the future.
3.  Affirms the interpretive competence of other viewers by appearing to remove some of the text's ambiguities.

This final point is crucial to the enjoyment of 'so bad it's good', since it is a category that by definition involves stepping outside of what we perceive to be the intention of an author or text. While *The Room*'s theatrical screenings may well offer attendees a somewhat atypical cinema experience, then, they are simply an extreme manifestation of the pleasures associated with other texts in the SOBIG category. Recommending the film to a friend and encouraging them to find humour in its 'badness' would apparently provide similar gratification, justifying one's own tastes and interpretive competence. Jonathan Gray argues that comedy is particularly adept at flattering 'our competence with the world and our critical understanding of it' (2006: 106), but in the case of *The Room* (and SOBIG more generally), this appeal is considerably heightened because viewers are required to construct the comedy for themselves, from the barest of raw materials.

The popularity of *The Room* can be said to have emerged from various cult traditions,[18] but it is also important to acknowledge the fact that its 'fans' (at least those who participated in this study) demonstrate a slightly different sensibility to cult fandom. While some respondents spoke of the film (and the experience of watching it in the cinema) as 'unique', there seemed to be little anxiety about its increasing popularity. Cult film magazines have often promoted the inaccessibility of particular texts as one of the pleasures of the cult

scene (Jancovich, 2002: 319-20), but the 'fans' that I spoke to about *The Room* were far more likely to lament its cultural and/or material elusiveness than celebrate it. 'Fans' derive great pleasure from their ironic/comic reading of the film, but these readings must subsequently be justified and legitimated by the reactions of others. In some respects, then, 'so bad it's good' appreciation is only concerned with cultural capital to the extent that it can be used to enhance one's social capital. Where cult fans distinguish themselves in part by distancing themselves from the 'mainstream' (Jancovich, 2002), SOBIG 'fans' tend to mobilise their tastes primarily as a way of building their pre-existing social networks.

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## Notes

[1] Wiseau has in recent years become notoriously secretive about his past, his personal life, and the financial aspects of *The Room*'s production, but he admitted the figure of six million US dollars in a 2007 interview with *LAist*. See Shatkin, 2007.

[2] The larger of the two screens at the Prince Charles Cinema seats 285 people. The screening that I refer to here was virtually full to capacity, although attendance was slightly lower in December 2010 when I returned for research purposes (and further exaggerated by the projector breaking down on several occasions, which caused some people to leave early).

[3] I include the word 'fandom' here (and 'fans' throughout the essay) in inverted commas purely to draw attention to the seemingly contradictory practice of taking pleasure in something that one genuinely considers to be 'bad'. Use of the word 'fan' (i.e. without inverted commas) also suggests a certain level of reverence for the film, which many attendees at these screenings did not demonstrate. Existing definitions of fans, anti-fans, and non-fans (see, for example, Gray, 2003) are

certainly difficult to apply to *The Room*'s audiences (and SOBIG 'fans' more generally), suggesting that further work on this topic may well be needed.

[4] For an interesting essay that does do this, see Hunter, 2005, in which the author offers an analysis of the critically derided *Showgirls* (Paul Verhoeven, 1995) from the perspective of a 'fan-boy'.

[5] Sincerest thanks must go to everyone that took part in my research, without whom this article would not have been possible, and especially Dillon for introducing me to *The Room* in the first place. I am also grateful to the staff at the Prince Charles Cinema, and to the students in charge of Christ's Films, for being so accommodating and allowing me to approach their customers.

[6] Unfortunately (but perfectly understandably), the Prince Charles Cinema was unable to share details of how many tickets were sold at either of the screenings I attended there. The figure of 10-20% is thus a conservative estimate based on the capacity of the auditorium and the approximate number of empty seats. I am confident that the Cambridge sample represents closer to 20% of the total audience, since attendance figures were far more manageable, enabling me to speak to almost everybody there.

[7] The names of all respondents have been changed to preserve anonymity.

[8] Certainly one important aspect of 'so bad it's good' that this study does not explicitly address is the extent to which social class is linked to the ironic/comic reading protocol. Existing scholarship has frequently noted the tendency for fans of cult media to be predominantly middle class and well educated (see for example, Jancovich, 2002; Sconce, 2003). Similarly, the majority of participants in my research appeared to be high in educational capital, with university students being particularly well represented across my research, and several respondents demonstrating a detailed knowledge of cult films. However, given the fact that one of my two case study audiences was *entirely* made up of university students (the historically middle/upper class institution of Cambridge University, no less), I consider the makeup of my sample to be too biased to argue anything conclusive. I suggest that a more extensive sample of SOBIG fans would need to be taken before this idea can be taken further. I do not think it is a coincidence, however, that media articles discussing *The Room* and SOBIG taste more generally are, in Britain at least, exclusively found in broadsheet newspapers with primarily middle-class readerships. *The Guardian*/*Observer*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Times* and *The Independent* have all covered the subject since 2008, whereas if there have been any such articles appearing in the tabloid press, I have not yet come across them.

[9] The celebrities who have publically declared their affection for *The Room* – including Kristen Bell, Alec Baldwin and Edgar Wright, as well as those mentioned above – are notable for their strong ties to (critically acclaimed) comedy above all else. The long and multifarious career of Alec Baldwin is the only exception here, but the late 2000s saw him win a series of awards (including two Emmys, three Golden Globes, and six Screen Actor's Guild awards) for his performances as Jack Donaghy in the sitcom *30 Rock* (NBC, 2006-).

[10] For a good example of this in practice, see Hunter, 2005.

[11] This interview with Wiseau appears as a bonus feature on the Region 1 DVD of *The Room*.

[12] I learned of the move to fortnightly screenings through correspondence with the cinema's head of marketing (e-mail to the author, 7 June 2011). At the time of writing, however, the change had yet to be implemented, and screenings were still being held once per month.

[13] Again, I stress that the numbers I am working with here are fairly small, and so cannot be said to represent the audience as a whole. Bruce Austin's statistical analysis of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* audiences does however suggest a similar statistical likelihood, with 'veteran' and 'regular'

viewers being far more likely to be male than female, reflecting trends in cult film audiences more generally.

[14] See Jonathan Gray (2010) for more on the effect(s) of critical paratextuality. Building on work by Martin Barker, Jane Arthurs, and Ramaswami Harindranth, Gray demonstrates the extent to which critical paratexts can significantly influence the reception of a cultural text, prefiguring how viewers/readers/listeners prepare to consume it. He also uses the example of *Friday Night Lights* (NBC, 2006-11) to show how press reviews can effectively 'co-create' a text, or position it within a particular value hierarchy (Ibid, pp.166-73).

[15] The 'Viewer's Guide' that was handed out is practically identical to the one published on *AVClub.com*, only with some decorative customisations relating to the Prince Charles Cinema. See House of Qwesi (2008).

[16] Note that by categorising the two audiences as 'veteran' and 'rookie', I am referring to the overall behaviour of the group, ignoring (in those moments) the fact that both audiences were comprised of 'fans' who differed wildly in their knowledge and experience of the film. Matt Hills points out some of the problems associated with attempting to place fans 'along a spectrum of increased involvement', arguing that distinctions between, for example, the 'fan' and the 'follower' are often far too fluid to fit neatly into such definitions (2002, x).

[17] This differs slightly from the stance adopted by Christopher Washburne and Maiken Derno in their study of 'Bad Music', which, they argue, is 'first and foremost a social construct' (2004: 2). Instead, while my focus in this essay is on SOBIG as a social construct, I align myself more with Matt Hills, who sees cult objects as 'neither textually programmable nor entirely textually arbitrary', paradoxically being '*both* "found" … *and* "created" … by the viewer.' (2002: 131; original emphasis). Also see MacDowell and Zborowski, 2011.

[18] The ironic or comic appropriation of cultural texts is arguably more of an established tradition in the United States than in the United Kingdom. As long ago as the late-1970s, American book collections began to be released with titles such as *The Fifty Worst Films Ever Made* (Medved, Dreyfuss and Medved, 1978), *The Golden Turkey Awards* (Medved and Medved, 1980), and *Bad Movies We Love* (Margulies and Rebello, 1993), while 1981 marked the inaugural Golden Raspberry (or 'Razzie') awards ceremony (see Wilson, 2005). Most notably, 1988 saw the beginning of the cult television show *Mystery Science Theater 3000* (1988-99), which sought to infuse 'bad' movies with comedy by featuring characters that picked holes in the narratives and 'riffed' over the dialogue. As well as screenings of *The Room*, recent British examples include Robin Ince's 'Bad Book Club' stand-up comedy tour and accompanying book (Ince, 2010), as well as 'Bad Film Club' events taking place at the Prince Charles Cinema and the Barbican Arts Centre (both in London).