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Room and the Confinement of Ideology

Sam Fujikawa '22

Lenny Abrahamson's 2015 drama *Room*, based on the novel by Emma Donoghue, delves into the life of Jack, a five-year-old boy who has been held captive his entire life in a small shed with his mother Joy, whom he affectionately calls "Ma." Exploring the film's themes of captivity and power, I will be using Louis Althusser's concept of ideology to illustrate the stark difference in perceptions of reality that Jack and Ma have regarding their confinement in *Room* and their supposed freedom in the outside world. Analyzing the film through this lens allows me to argue that the film finds the binary of freedom and confinement to be unsatisfactory, as the struggles that both Ma and Jack face within *Room* do not expel or dismiss the struggles that exist in the world that they are deprived of. I will also be considering Judith Butler's notions on gender, specifically gender performance and agency, when looking at the character of Jack, who has spent his entire life separate from the imposition of gender put upon by society. Because of this separation, I will make the case that Jack's character queers the norms of gender through his inability to replicate gender (which in itself is a replication of gendered actions) through a primary example of a "boy" or "man," as these figures are absent in his upbringing.

To explore the notions of reality through ideology, I will be utilizing Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards and Investigation)," which derails and destabilizes the notion of an objective reality. Althusser defines ideology as the representation of

“the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (450). Acknowledging that ideology is an illusion that is indicative of a deeper truth, Althusser further grounds the concept by insisting in its material nature constantly being cemented through its subjects practicing ideological rituals. Thus, ideas begin to near redundancy as the practices of ideology form a material apparatus that shuns outside thought (Althusser 454-55). As ideology is necessary to accept a relation to reality and existence, one may not be separate from it; Althusser contends that the “choice” to believe in one ideology is fallible due to the fact that every person is born into the inescapable ideology (457). In *Room*, the ideologies of Jack and Ma provide space to destabilize the illusion of captivity being confined to the definition of being devoid of the “free” outside world. The film displays that while the struggles and conditions that the two face may be similar, it is because of their different perception and understanding of their conditions that the two clash with each other.

In her work *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler categorizes gender as an unstable formation of “acts, gestures, and desires [which] produce the effect of an internal core or substance... that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause” (328). Thus, gender is not an internal essence but an external repetition of labeled behavior. She declares that the construct of gender provides no agency, as a choice is not made on whether one can or cannot repeat gendered behavior but on how one may be able to repeat this in a behavior that destabilizes the already centerless signification of gender (Butler 335). As gender and sex are prescribed to the body before agency can occur, the supposed choice of repetition is already made through gendered language, norms, and

ideals. This unstable and centerless nature of gender is revealed by the character of Jack within *Room*, as he grows up as the sole boy in his entire understanding of existence. He is the binary opposite to the female Ma, who both counters him with a labeled femininity, yet also acts as his only real person to base replicative behaviors off of. Through the sheltered nature of Jack's upbringing, the film creates an interesting portrait of how unstable and meaningless the labels and understandings put upon gender actually are.

Room begins with a scene displaying Jack's fifth birthday that establishes the conditions he and Ma live within: a small shed hijacked to serve as a soundproof prison for a woman and child, devoid of light, stuffed with old and worn furniture and fabrics, full of drawings only a young child could create. Room is both a dank and dreary cell and a home that is filled with effort and love, and it is quickly realized that the shed acts as the former for Ma and the latter for Jack. For Jack, Room is the world, there is nothing that exists outside of it, and it is never-ending, it stretches from the end to the other end but also never stops, everything within it is everything in the entire world. Ma has created this lens for him; to protect her son born out of the rape by her captor, Old Nick, she has fed Jack the idea that Room is all there is, that TV is a portal of outer space, that Room is a reality separate from her own reality, the reality of being kidnapped as a teenager and held captive in a shed for seven years. It is a distressing display of how powerful an ideology is, how Jack can view his relationship to his conditions as positive and in fondness, while Ma can view her relationship to the same conditions as what the film's viewers see: a horrifying imprisonment with living conditions that are so limited and inhumane that they resemble a nightmare. But after examining both Jack and

Ma's relationships to their condition of Room, their differing perceptions make sense; when Jack has only ever experienced the confinement of Room, how can he understand the freedom that exists outside of it, or the oppression that exists within it? For Jack, freedom exists *within* the confinement of Room, he has no sense of what lies outside of the perception of his own conditions and cannot see his conditions in a way that resembles what those who have experienced what lies outside of Room (Ma and viewers) can. Ma, on the other hand, has a broader understanding of her situation since she has existed outside of Room and is held here against her will, yet she cannot view Room in a way that the sheltered Jack can. Within the first minutes of the film, it is determined that the ideologies of Jack and Ma differ in a way so extreme that the understanding of Room's conditions upon them seem almost opposite.

It isn't until Ma attempts to escape Room that the two's ideologies directly clash and change. While Ma originally lied to Jack about what lies outside of Room in order to protect him, his safety is put in imminent threat when Old Nick declares he has been unemployed and can no longer afford to fulfill their basic needs. So, she decides to tell Jack the truth, declaring that the outside is not Space but the world, that TV doesn't project magic images outside of reality but images that actually resemble reality; she is attempting to interpellate Jack and convince him to follow her ideology, to give up the ideology that she fed him for his protection. Though Jack originally protests these new ideas and views, dismissing Ma as "stupid," he slowly begins to show question using what he already knows: television. When watching TV, he begins to ask what is real and what is just TV, accepting that TV is no longer magical images but something closer to "real,"

something that he may be able to see with his own eyes someday. Since Ma's ideology is rooted in a closer understanding to her actual relations in reality, it is plausible that Jack begins to shed the ideology created for him for the one that has a broader scope and more concrete basis.

The film's implications of reality and ideology reach its most complex and interesting argument after Ma and Jack escape Room and assimilate back into the outside world. Ma, now called Joy, immediately shows comfort and ease when operating in the world. She is obviously relieved to escape the hell that she has been living for the past seven years and excited to reinsert herself into the life that was taken away from her by Old Nick. Jack conversely exhibits a more apprehensive nature in his behavior, as this reality completely disproves all he had previously known. His reluctance to accept this new reality is best shown when Ma and Jack embrace after their successful escape, and Jack asks Ma, "Can we go to bed?" (*Room*). Ma affirms and declares that the police will take them somewhere to sleep soon, however she misinterpreted Jack's words. He was referring to Bed, the bed within Room, not sleep, beginning a rocky assimilation process for the both of them. As the two of them begin to create their new lives (or for Joy's case, return to her new life), the "freedom" that outside holds begins to become contained. The two are immediately met with an overwhelming public response so severe that they cannot leave their house in fear of a bombardment of questioning, therefore they return to a different, but familiar, form of confinement. When showing Jack old pictures of herself and her former friends, Joy begins to feel the reality that she has stepped back into did not pause for those around her: her friends' lives went on, her home changed, and her parents separated all while she

was imprisoned and tormented. She is forced to accept that her captivity did not pause those around her, that life went on, and that the world she returned to is not full of the same opportunities available to her when she last left. She is now seven years older, a mother, and will forever be affected by the trauma and publicity caused by her surviving Room. These are new obstacles that greatly derail the “freedom” that she envisioned outside of Room, a freedom that more resembled a return to the past rather than assimilation into the present.

The binary of freedom and confinement is most destabilized when Joy must subject herself to a primetime interview in order to pay for the legal fees associated with the trial of her captor. This moment represents how limited the outside actually is for Joy: she must relive her trauma for a national audience and receive intense questioning in order to pay for legal fees that she did not ask for, for a situation that was imposed upon her by a man who kidnapped, imprisoned, controlled, and raped her for years. What sort of freedom is this? Is this the treatment that a truly free world would enact on a woman who underwent the trauma that Joy did? It’s a moment in the film that is heartbreaking in its shattering of Joy’s understanding of her relationship to reality; the interview even gets to the point where it is implied that Joy did not do what was best for Jack by not forcing her captor to bring him to a hospital, putting the blame of Jack’s upbringing onto not the man who held him and his mother captive but upon Joy. This implication is what shatters the illusion of reality Joy previously held, and unable to overcome the hardships that are presented to her in a place that should allow for her freedom, she attempts to kill herself. Joy’s attempted suicide marks the power of ideology, especially when it is

broken and replaced by one that falls closer to the actual relationship to real condition.

The gender of Jack additionally creates tension within the film because of its highlighting of the construction and imposition of gender upon the body. In Room, Jack is a boy; his pronouns are he/him/his, he is called gendered terms such as “boy” and “son,” and he wears clothes that would be commonly referred to as “masculine.” However, these are about the only constructs of gender that are directly imposed upon him. Because of his confinement, he is the only boy or man within his entire world and therefore does not have a primary figure that he can emulate and replicate in order to perform gender. And since his ideology only allows for himself and Ma to exist as real people, Jack is provided an interesting sandbox of gender allowing him to exist in a way that allows him to control what a boy is, what he should be. So, unlike the typical five-year-old boy in the outside world, Jack has long hair which he calls his “strong.” It is interesting that long hair, a feature that is most commonly replicated by the “girl,” would be labeled as “strong,” something that is associated with and desirable to masculinity. But Jack is able to exist in a way that is not constrained by societal expectations to repeat gendered behavior, so he decides what defines him, not gender.

When Jack enters the outside world, gender begins its imposition upon him. In his first encounter with someone outside of Room, he is given the wrong pronouns and called “honey” and “little girl” because of the long hair he sports that, on the outside, is most common among girls. The gifts he receives from the many supporters of himself and Joy are mostly gendered as “for boys.” And his grandmother consistently mentions her desire to cut his hair, which is a feature that he insists makes him strong. It

is on the outside where Jack begins to both exist freely and within the constraints of societal constructs. So, it is unsurprising that as he assimilates further into the world and must face the consequences and situations existent there, he begins to replicate the gendered behavior surrounding him. This is most evident in a scene following Joy's attempted suicide, while Joy remains absent in the hospital and Jack continues to exist within his grandmother's home, looking at old pictures of Joy and longing for her return. Jack approaches his grandmother and asks for scissors to cut his hair, which she questions due to her understanding of how important it is to him. He confirms this and admits that the real reason he wants to cut his hair is so he can send his strong to Joy, who "needs [it] more than [himself]" (*Room*). It's an important moment that fuses the masculinity present in Room (what Jack does and believes in) with the masculinity present in society. Jack must give up his strength in order to help his mother; it is a moment of sacrifice and succumbing to societal expectations, though Jack does so in a way that respects the signification of his hair within Room.

Room explores the fallacies that present themselves in modern society through the exploration of the signified "freedom" and the construct of gender. Jack's existence within Room and Joy's existence outside of it display how unstable and subjective the idea of freedom truly is; Jack's ideology allows for a blind understanding of horrible conditions as positive, as these conditions are all he knows. Joy's transition from literal confinement and torture to a reality that confines and imposes misfortune upon her in a different way accordingly displays the true lack of freedom and justice that survivors of trauma are offered, of the torture that a world that is supposedly fair puts upon them. The imposition of gender additionally adds to the fallacy of

a truly fair and free society, as Jack is immediately forced into boxes and labels upon his entrance into the outside world, boxes and labels that he did not have to worry about even while he was in much worse conditions. The film succeeds in breaking down the simplicity that is often accompanied by stories of victims or survivors, one that ends when supposed “freedom” is reached because, in reality, the world that survivors return to is not the kind, easy place that is often painted out to be.

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