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***Room*. Lenny Abrahamson. Co-production Ireland-Canada-United Kingdom; Film4 Productions/Irish Film Board/ Téléfilm Canada/Filmnation Entertainment/ Element Pictures /No Trace Camping, 2015; 118 min**

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*Room* is an independent Irish-Canadian drama film based on a novel by Emma Donoghue and directed by Lenny Abrahamson, first screened at the Telluride Film Festival in 2015. A real event set the stage for the movie. In 2008 the media disclosed that an Austrian man Joseph Fritzl kept his daughter prisoner for 24 years in the basement of their home and had fathered 7 children by her. Inspired by this horrifying story, Donoghue wrote *Room* and then the screenplay about Joy Newsome (Brie Larson), a girl deceived by a psychotic man into falling into his trap for seven years of imprisonment in a small room with one window facing the sky. She is raped repeatedly by her captor Old Nick (Sean Bridgers) and gives birth to a child who becomes her only solace.

When Jack (the child) reaches age five, Joy devises a successful escape. She teaches Jack to play dead, wraps him in a bedraggled rug and ask Old Nick to take him to a hospital in the hope that Jack might be saved. Nick believes the ploy, dumps the rug with Jack's apparent corpse in the back of his truck and drives away. Jack dazedly seizes his opportunity, jumps out the truck and asks a passersby to help. And so mother and child are saved. In this paper I look at the relationship between the child (Jack) and the mother (Joy) and the biological rapist father (Old Nick) from the perspective of Freud’s Oedipus complex (Freud, 1924d) and compare it with Lacan’s view (Lacan and Fink, 2006, Lacan, 2017(. Then, I analyze the movie in terms of what I call transitional time object (TTO).

At the outset there is no hint of discontent in the mother-child dyad. But one quickly learns that the mother desperately wants to escape. The movie begins on a day like any other day for any mother and child. They exercise. Jack greets every object in the room and helps prepare breakfast. Abrahamson keeps the audience in the same profound ignorance that Jack is in. In spite of this, we sense something is wrong, unlike Jack whose only communication with the outside world is a TV set and a skylight.

To protect Jack Ma has assembled the entire world in that single room and as a result he kept in the *jouissance* of the (m)Other. She only sees herself, Jack and, of course, Old Nick. Whenever Old Nick appears Jack must jump into his bed (the closet) and Ma must stand far from the door, move aside slightly and turn her face to the wall. Likewise, when Nick punches the exit code, Ma must turn her face away.These are unbreakable rules; if disobeyed, they carry dire consequences.

In an aftermath sequence a callous TV interviewer asks Joy, ‘now this is the ultimate sacrifice and I understand that, but did you think about him having a normal childhood?’ Joy’s reply deserves mulling over. She replies, ‘But he had me!’ The next question throws her into deep guilt that triggers a suicide attempt. Interviewer: ‘Of course he did, but was that the best thing for him? ’Joy’s response (‘but he had me!’) displays the confidence a mother is capable of, a confidence that she herself is at least the 'average expectable environment' (Hartman, 1939) for her child. She knows that she can provide most of what her child needs for his physical and psychic development, for survival. In the beginning of her incarceration she tried to knock out Nick with the toilet lid but failed, with painful consequences. The next time she focuses on escaping is when there is real threat as the electricity is cut off during a freeze. Her motherly instinct rises and fear for the loss of her son forces her into action.

The film makes Jack its focal point. After the "play dead" ruse, according to Ma’s instructions, as the truck bumps up and down Jack rolls and unwinds the rug. When the truck slows down, Jack jumps out. He has been through all these escape plan stages in his mind but since he’s never before encountered the real world he’s stunned. As he’s about to jump he stares at the sky, trees and things he has never seen before, or only seen them on television, and is mesmerized. Hence, just as he jumps out of the truck Nick grabs him and tries to pull him back into the truck while we’re waiting to hear Jack shout for help. All these confusions portray Jack’s difficulty in facing the symbolic order.

The audience see a woman who, at the peak of youth and desire, is forced out of the external world. While there are stout physical walls between herself and the external world there is also a tantalising window in the ceiling! To survive she is forced to satisfy the life drive as best she can. She has no other choice. She senses that drives are insatiable and that if Jack realizes that he has the possibility to better satisfy them the conditions in the room will become intolerable for him. Thus, she has limited the world for him to that single room. She depicts Old Nick and TV characters to Jack as magical illustrations. In this way she protected Jack, and should be praised for it.

When Old Nick first appears, he takes off his pants and heads for the bed, which is in Jack’s blind spot in the closet. Suddenly Jack starts counting as if what is about to happen occurred so many times that Jack knows exactly how long it’s going to take. Perhaps the crack in the wardrobe door and the repetition of the intercourse scene can be compared to a primal scene that has lost its traumatic effect through abundant repetition. It does raise a certain amount of anxiety in Jack which is why he tries to distract himself. We hear his thoughts at this point: they delineate the mark between reality and illusion. For Jack that which he witnesses in the room is real and everything else is unreal. The plants he sees are real but the trees are not. All the people on TV are unreal and even Old Nick is half real for Jack has only seen him through the crack in the wardrobe door. He can see Nick’s body so he is not sure if Nick is totally illusory. At the same time as these thoughts run through him, we hear the creaking sound of the parents’ bed.

A beautiful point that the writer makes is when Jack confronts the real world on his fifth birthday. This, ironically, can be seen as a way to resolve the Oedipus complex. Ma (or the Other) who shapes the unconscious of the child, strives for great achievement when she first decides to plan the escape: she begins to overturn a number of Jack’s givens, thereby dispelling that which she has built for he no longer needs them and it is time to face the external world.

We initially see Jack’s resistance to leaving the familiar and how frightened he becomes, but Ma has made up her mind and she succeeds in getting Jack out. Once again we watch how quickly after Jack's entrance into the real world (read Freud’s latency phase of development) Ma begins to lose the greatness of her. In spite of Ma’s fears, and ours, that Jack might not be able to come to terms with reality Jack does so much earlier than we might expect and much more simply. Isn’t this what it’s like in ordinary reality? Don’t all parents have a difficult time coming to terms with the fact that their children have grown up?

From Jack’s view, there is an especially noteworthy issue: father does not and never has existed and Jack feels no need for his presence. This is the point where I would argue the movie moves from the Freudian Oedipal to the Lacanian. According to the Freudian Oedipus Complex (Freud, 1924d), the real presence of the father is necessary and it is his presence that starts the separation of the child from the mother. As Evans (1996) puts it, initially Lacan saw oedipal development as Freud did and only differed from him on the basis of historical and cultural relativity. According to Lacan (2017, pp. 179-213) the Oedipus complex has three ‘times’ that are not necessarily chronological but logical. In the first 'time', which Lacan calls the pre-oedipal triangle; the child realizes the desire of the mother is to something else not him/her. It is the desire for the imaginary phallus. He learns that he and Mother are daunted by a lack. She is lacking because she carries a desire for something else inside and he is lacking because he is unable to satisfy her desire. Mother is seeking a phallus and the subject is seeking to become that phallus for her. Thus, at this stage the mother is omnipotent and her desire is the law.

The second oedipal 'time' is brought about with the intrusion of the imaginary father and the separation of the child from the mother (separation of phallus or the castration of the mother). It doesn’t really matter if the father exists or not. The imagined father is created through mother’s discourse, thereby separating the child from the mother and setting the rules for both of them.

The third oedipal 'time' is similar to Freud’s. The real father enters and shows the child that he cannot be the mother’s phallus. He is the only one with a phallus and he is not going to share it with anyone. This calms the child and helps him accept his castration and to give up trying **to be** a phallus. Instead, he wants to become like his father and **to have** a phallus in order to become the object of the desire of the mother.

In *Room* Joy succeeds in creating the imaginary father. This father is a monster for Jack but the presence of a symbolic father is always ambivalent. Jack has gone through the first two oedipal times but the absence of the real father who should simultaneously be the object of his life hinders him from being able to separate from mother. Although ambivalence is itself one of the main characteristics of this stage the audience sees no ambivalence regarding Old Nick in Jack. Nick is indisputably the object of fear and aggression and mother has taught Jack to stay as far away from him as possible. Only when Jack hears that the Old Nick wanted to buy a birthday gift for him do we see a sign of ambivalence. Ma herself hates Old Nick (a nickname for the devil). Thus, we only see the imaginary father from whom one must escape. The father never creates a relationship with Jack. He only visits for sex and, in order to safeguard Jack, mother sets things up so that the two never confront each other.

At night, Jack must sleep at a set hour before Old Nick enters the room. Jack is not allowed to leave his cupboard after that. With Old Nick’s first entrance we see him carrying in basic food necessities. He asks about the birthday cake on the table. As he undresses he tells Joy that she should have told him it was Jack’s birthday so that he could have brought his son a present. Jack stares at him from his hideout. When Nick significantly asks Joy if Jack is four, Jack whispers ‘five’! This sequence may show Nick’s and Jack’s desire to communicate with each other, which is banned by Ma.

Hence, Jack seems to be thirsting for connection with a real man so that he can be freed from the burden of being a phallus for his mother. In the real world, after the escape, Jack seriously needs the father and his name. We see him move away from the mother to develop a relationship with Joy’s stepfather, his dog and the neighbor’s son. This creates the picture of a normal neurotic boy for the audience and pushes them to forget about the depression of the mother who has not as yet overcome her fusion with her son.

Earlier in captivity occurs a scene in which a mouse enters the room, Jack tries to relate to it but Ma immediately interferes and attacks the mouse. When Jack begins to object Ma tries to explain herself but Jack simply doesn’t accept that the mouse was an evil creature so Ma ends the scene, asserting the mouse is fine.

Jack, ‘are you tricking me?’

Ma, ‘No, I swear. He’s safe at home in the backyard with his Ma.’

Ma refers to the world outside and Jack immediately asks what the backyard is. Mother, who has understood her slip, tries to entertain him with something else. Now, Jack has another question which is why she hadn’t told Old Nick that it was his birthday so he could bring Jack a present. The next day when Jack wakes up he sees the present that Old Nick had brought him. When Nick comes in that night and asks about Jack’s reaction Ma doesn’t bother answering him. Jack is watching this. This is the first time we see Nick’s face, twenty minutes into the movie, from Jack’s perspective through the wardrobe.

A few seconds later, Nick realizes that Jack is awake and he asks Joy if she keeps him in the wardrobe all day and all night. He then tries to lure Jack out by tempting him with chocolates at which point Joy invites him into their bed. At this point we can see Old Nick’s rather dubious paternal feelings as we witness Ma’s anxiety of Old Nick hurting Jack. She distances an untrustworthy father whose love for her son she can’t credit.

While Ma and Old Nick are asleep Jack creeps out the cupboard to look closely at Nick’s face. He shows no trace of anxiety. Nick opens his eyes and responds to him but suddenly Joy attacks him in pure terror screaming for him not to touch Jack. We realize that while a curious Jack tends to want to get closer to his father his doubts about Ma’s rules and beliefs increase gradually for he sets about questioning her endlessly.

Had Jack not escaped he might have ended up being a subject with a perverse structure. In this situation, although the subject entered the second oedipal 'time' and identifies with the imaginary phallus instead of with the father, he returns to the first oedipal time. Due to the rules that Ma set and the presence of a terrifying imaginary father who at times forces separation between Jack and Ma, Jack is spared falling into the pits of psychosis but he has not been able to place the symbolic father into his signifiers’ chain. The movie seems to challenge the point that the formation of structure is limited to a specific time frame and remains unchangeable throughout life (Dor, 1998). It humours the theory that if Jack is given the chance to interact with a rational father even after the age of five he can still go back to a neurotic structure.

We can also take a look at the Room from a completely different view of the time. I have been interested in the subject of time and have suggested the new concepts of Transitional Time Object (TTO) and Transitional Time Phenomenon (TTP). The TTOs “are internal or external objects that can absorb libido and create the sensation of the passage of time; transitional time phenomena are methods used by the ego to cathect the libido onto these objects.” (Pajoohandeh, 2020. p. 99)

The present time then is the time of tension and anxiety and represents the trauma of birth. The infant with the help of the first TTO (i.e. the mother or her breast) can resist and bear that situation. In Room you can see that Jack uses Joy as a TTO, and there is likely nothing that bothers him. Also, when Jack entered the real world he could find many other TTOs which were more interesting for him than his mom and his ego could withdraw the libido from Joy and direct it on them. But we should also consider the role of Jack for Joy as a transitional time object. It seems that during pregnancy, mothers establish an emotional connection with the baby in their uterus. This connection, or in Freudian language, this libido cathexis on the child makes him or her a TTO for the mother too. The amount of cathexis is greater at tthe baby's birth, and gradually the mother can remove some libido from the baby and restore it to other objects and activities. But, for Joy, this did not happen. She had to maintain all of her libido on Jack. Then, Jack became her most eminent TTO without which she could not pass through the present time. So, we can understand the cause of her suicide attempt when she was no longer be able to use Jack as her TTO.

From this view we can modify Lacan’s Oedipus complex, because we can see both the mother and the child (in addition to the father) are seeking TTOs for themselves to pass the unbearable moment of the present. They neither seek the phallus nor want to cut it off! It is clear that at the outset, the mother is the most interesting TTO for both the child and his/her father. So, the rivalry between them occurs because offering the best TTO is the same as the competition between the mother and the child over the father. I know, however, that this new theory needs more consideration, but I think it can help us to look at human relationships and their psychic structures more revealingly.

If we take a broader perspective on *Room* we might say that the storyline speaks to the lives of many families, particularly those in the third world or developing countries: places where a woman often marries without love or through family pressure. The woman is a captive whose sole proprietor is the man. She had absolutely no rights. She cannot even leave the house without his permission. In some such families at times a woman spends uninterrupted months at home. She is not even allowed to have a cellphone. Her restricted range of entertainment is similar to that of Joy. The husband has no responsibility other than to provide for the family and to impregnate. Often not a single word is passed between the father and his children. Hence, *Room* does not depict such an unusual event as Western audiences may reckon for it shows the life of countless women and children on this planet.

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