

MT VOID 04/14/23 -- Vol. 41, No. 42, Whole Number 2271



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Mini Reviews, Part 19 (film reviews by Mark R. Leeper and Evelyn C. Leeper):

This is the nineteenth batch of mini-reviews, all focusing on the "one-percent" (in honor of Tax Day):

THE MENU: We have never attended a tasting menu, so we have to rely on the reports of others. Some claim THE MENU is fairly accurate in its basics, while others emphasize the satire in its excesses. In that it may be like the wine-tasting in SIDEWAYS, but taken to extremes. (In SIDEWAYS, it's the "hint of asparagus" in a wine that is amusing; in THE MENU a wine has "a faint scent of longing and regret".)

There is also a first course that looks like the island with rocks, plant sprigs, and one scallop. There is a bread course without bread. These may actually be accurate to some tasting menus. But as the meal progresses, it is clear that much of what we see is not. (I'm pretty sure that the tortillas are strictly social commentary.)

Sometimes everything seems to connect. Ralph Fiennes is in this; his nephew is in THE WOMAN KING, which we saw the day after we saw THE MENU. There is a private island in THE MENU; there is also one in THE GLASS ONION, which we saw two days earlier. (In THE MENU, Fiennes has a grudge against all his guests. In THE GLASS ONION, all the guests have a grudge against Edward Norton.) And there is even a connection to THE BANSHEES OF INISHERIN, but telling you what it is would be a spoiler.

Released theatrically 18 November 2022. Rating: high +2 (-4 to +4) or 8/10

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9764362/reference>

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_menu

GLASS ONION--A KNIVES OUT MYSTERY: GLASS ONION is a sequel to the 2019 film KNIVES OUT. We saw the first film three years ago, and thought it mildly entertaining, and that covers this as well.

This starts with a series of puzzles, but after the first couple, they are shown as mere snippets. One has to do with the Fibonacci sequence, and they didn't show you enough of the Fibonacci sequence puzzle; the Fibonacci sequence deserves some respect.

There are a lot of in-jokes and references. Daniel Craig as Benoit Blanc says, "I need danger, a hunt, a challenge"--a fairly obvious reference to Craig's James Bond persona. The film also has the James Bond exotic travel vibe.

The "disruptors" are (one hopes) an exaggeration of the "one percent". Set during the pandemic, the disruptors show all the attitudes of the privileged to masking: one has a mesh mask, a couple wear their masks incorrectly, and a couple have no masks at all. Only Benoit Blanc seems concerned about his mask.

The plot itself is very convoluted, and nothing is what it seems, either to the characters in the movie, or to us. This is a film you need to watch more than once to catch all the twists, turns, and hints.

Released theatrically 23 November 2022 and on Netflix streaming 23 December 2022. Rating: +2 (-4 to +4) or 7/10

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt11564570/reference>

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/glass_onion_a_knives_out_mystery

TRIANGLE OF SADNESS: TRIANGLE OF SADNESS definitely emphasizes the three-part structure of a film, with the sections labeled "Part 1: Carl & Yaya", "Part 2: The Yacht", and "Part 3: The Island". There are some nice uses of bright colors, and a good use of space, with long sweeps through a tight backseat of a car, and using the fact that the same room can have very different dimensions in the way it would not in the real world. (At one point, the ceiling lights in the dining room look like thought balloons, but that is probably accidental.) The passengers on the yacht are the stereotypical spoiled rich: a weapons manufacturer and his wife (cleverly named Winston and Clementine), a bare-chested passenger who complains about a bare-chested member of the crew, a passenger who wants all the crew members to have fun for her entertainment, and so on. Somewhere near the halfway point, the film makes a sudden left turn into a world of political insanity. The Captain and a capitalist from Russia debate Marxism and communism, while the crew plays the "Internationale" in the galley. During a storm during the Captain's Dinner, the dining area goes totally bizarre. Then pirates attack the boat, and a small number of the passengers and crew end up on a desert island. The whole thing seems to be inspired by a combination of LA DOLCE VITA, various Luis Bunuel films, and THE ADMIRABLE CRICHTON.

Released theatrically 7 October 2022. Rating: low +1 (-4 to +4) or 5/10

Film Credits: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7322224/reference>

What others are saying: https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/triangle_of_sadness

[-mrl/ec]

Accidental Film Fests (comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

Over the last week we watched four Tom Cruise movies, not as some intentional Tom Cruise Festival, but pretty much coincidentally. Two were good, and two ... were not.

The good ones were MAGNOLIA and COLLATERAL. In MAGNOLIA, Cruise plays a sleaze-bag promoter of a course for what are now called "incels" ("involuntarily celibate"). And he does it so well, you end up really hating him.

In COLLATERAL, he is a hired killer who kidnaps taxi driver Jamie Foxx and plans to kill him when his jobs are done. Again, he manages to convey the cold menace of his role.

Then there is INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE. I realize that there is no real vampire personality, but whatever Cruise is doing, it is not at all convincing of anyone or anything.

And last--and possibly least, at least to me--is TOP GUN--MAVERICK. I know this an incredibly popular film, and series, and character, but really, it does nothing for me. Everything about the film and the character is a mass of cliches.

So there you have it. Tom Cruise is usually cast as a positive leading man, but he does villains so well that maybe he should take more of those roles.

And then we watched (in three days) three films about an ordinary person becoming involved in a high society crowd. First was RADIO DAYS, in which the ordinary people do not truly interact with high society, but listen to "Breakfast with Roger and Irene" on the radio, in which show Roger and Irene talk about how they had dinner with Cole and lots of other people they first-named. Next was MIDNIGHT IN PARIS, in which Owen Wilson finds himself repeatedly going through some sort of time portal to the 1920s where he hobnobs with Hemingway, Eliot, Stein, Picasso, Modigliani, Bunuel, and many others. (And from there he goes through another portal to La Belle Epoque and Toulouse-Lautrec et al.) And finally is MIDNIGHT IN THE GARDEN OF GOOD AND EVIL, where John Cusack is sent to report on a super-elite Christmas party. All were excellent; Mark suggests that MIDNIGHT IN PARIS may be Woody Allen's best film. (If that doesn't get letters of comment, nothing will.) [-ec]

Bechdel Test (comments by Boyd Nation):

In File 770 recently, Boyd Nation posted the following observation about applying the Bechdel Test to science fiction:

"[When] you get to the point where you're not meeting the Bechdel Test because your primary characters are a tea monk and a robot, you've probably gone past it and are circling around from the other side." [-bn]

[THE] HOLY BLOOD {,;AND THE} HOLY GRAIL (letters of comment by Peter Trei, Gary McGath, and John Dalman):

In response to [Evelyn's comments on PAST IMPERFECT and the book HOLY BLOOD, HOLY GRAIL](#) in the 04/07/23 issue of the MT VOID, Peter Trei writes:

[Evelyn wrote,] "Yes, he manages to misspell the names two of the three famous authors that he lists (and arguably uses a dash where a comma would have been a better choice). And later he refers to the book by Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh as THE HOLY BLOOD AND THE HOLY GRAIL, when the accurate title is HOLY BLOOD, HOLY GRAIL. Strangely, he uses the correct title on the next page, and then just HOLY BLOOD ten pages later, before reverting to THE HOLY BLOOD AND THE HOLY GRAIL in the index. For someone complaining about sloppiness (as indicating possible deception), Hoffer is hardly in an unassailable position."

If you look on Amazon, you'll find editions with both titles.

This jumped out at me, since while I can't put my hand on it, I'm pretty sure my 30+ year old copy is 'tHBatHG'.

Regardless, its a remarkable piece of fraud, spinning a 1950's French hoax into a fake "historical" account, later ripped off by Dan Brown. [-pt]

Evelyn responds:

My objection was more to the inconsistency than to getting the title wrong. Sort of like "MOBY-DICK" versus "MOBY DICK", upon which the consensus is that the title of the book is "MOBY-DICK", but the name of the whale is "Moby Dick". [-ecl]

Gary McGath notes:

If you claim that something is a fact, you can't properly accuse others of "ripping it off." Someone else could plagiarize the text, but it isn't plagiarism to use factual claims in one's own work, even if they're lies.

There are works of fiction which claim "Everything here is true!" as a literary device which no one is expected to believe (e.g., Lucian of Samosata's space-travel story), but I don't think HOLY BLOOD, HOLY GRAIL falls into that category. [-gmg]

John Dalman adds:

Two of the authors of HBHG sued Dan Brown's publisher for copyright infringement, and lost on basically those grounds.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dan_Brown#Copyright_infringement_cases

[-jd]

And Peter Trei elaborates:

For those unfamiliar:

Dan Brown was sued for plagiarism by Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh, on the grounds that much of the underlying story of THE DA VINCI CODE was taken from HOLY BLOOD, HOLY GRAIL.

The 'story' involves Christ knocking up Mary Magdalene before the Crucifixion, and her moving to the south of France, leading to a 'Jesus Bloodline' with descendants down to present day. Baigent and Leigh merged this with the 'Priory of Sion' hoax for their book. The 'Jesus bloodline' idea has history, but the Priory of Sion only dates to the 1950s.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesus_bloodline

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Priory_of_Sion

The rip-off is very obvious if you read both books, THE DA VINCI CODE even has a character named Teabing, an anagram of Baigent, and HOLY BLOOD, HOLY GRAIL is mentioned in the text.

However, the court found in favor of Brown, largely because HOLY BLOOD, HOLY GRAIL was published as non-fiction, and recounting "historical facts" isn't plagiarism, even if they are lies.

Since I was familiar with the sources at the time I first read THE DA VINCI CODE, my experience of the book was not the usual one. It was a bit like riding 'The Haunted Mansion' ride with every house maintenance light turned on--revelations did not surprise, and the plot holes and poor writing were obvious. [-pt]

This Week's Reading (book and film comments by Evelyn C. Leeper):

Our book and film group read *ORLANDO* by Virginia Woolf (Mariner, ISBN 978-0-156-70160-0) and watched the film by Sarah Polley this month. Interestingly, we had just re-watched Polley's *WOMEN TALKING* about a week earlier, and Polley's attention to the look of her films comes through. In *WOMEN TALKING*, for example, there is a very muted palette, with the color washed out a bit more in post-production. In *ORLANDO*, there are shots that look very "painterly"; one of Orlando and Shelmerdine looks like a Vermeer painting (even more than the works by famous Vermeer forger Han van Meegeren).

As far as the book, I reviewed it in the 01/30/2009 issue of the *MT VOID* (which can be found at) and covered a lot of how Woolf plays not only with time, but also with space. So I am not going to repeat any of that, but concentrate on what has become even more topical lately: the idea of gender roles.

Today we have four different axes of sex and gender: sex, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation. Even in 1928, Woolf distinguishes among them.

For example, at first Woolf says, "The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity." (Note that Woolf had no problem in 1928 using "their" as a singular non-binary pronoun.)

And this sounds like it was written yesterday: "Many people, taking this into account, and holding that such a change of sex is against nature, have been at great pains to prove (1) that Orlando had always been a woman, (2) that Orlando is at this moment a man. Let biologists and psychologists determine. It is enough for us to state the simple fact; Orlando was a man till the age of thirty; when he became a woman and has remained so ever since."

However, Woolf seems to think that changing someone's sex will change their gender identity: "Her modesty as to her writing, her vanity as to her person, her fears for her safety all seems to hint that what was said a short time ago about there being no change in Orlando the man and Orlando the woman, was ceasing to be altogether true. She was becoming a little more modest, as women are, of her brains, and a little more vain, as women are, of her person." The current thinking is that the gender identity is what is permanent, and the sex is changed to match that. (Of course, Orlando's sex change was beyond their control.)

Woolf also had a notion of a non-binary identity: "Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above." And indeed, Orlando would also switch between male to female clothing as the situation required (not unlike Irene Adler in "a Scandal in Bohemia"): "The task is made still more difficult by the fact that she found it convenient at this time to change frequently from one set of clothes to another."

And again, "it was to each such a revelation that a woman could be as tolerant and free-spoken as a man, and a man as strange and subtle as a woman," This emphasizes the stereotypes of male and female, while pointing out that they are the extremes, and reality is more of a continuum.

And because of this concept of a non-binary identity, Woolf is left to say, "Whether, then, Orlando was most man or woman, it is difficult to say and cannot now be decided."

Woolf also addresses the position of women in specific in society. As Orlando is returning to England as a woman, she thinks, "And that's the last oath I shall ever be able to swear ... once I set foot on English soil. And I shall never be able to crack a man over the head, or tell him he lies in his teeth, or draw my sword and run him through the body, or sit among my peers, or wear a coronet, or walk in procession, or sentence a man to death, or lead an army, or prance down Whitehall on a charger, or wear seventy-two different medals on my breast. All I can do, once I set foot on English soil, is to pour out tea and ask my lords how they like it."

And later, "The man has his hand free to seize his sword, the woman must use hers to keep the satins from slipping from her shoulders. The man looks the world full in the face, as if it were made for his uses and fashioned to his liking. The woman takes a sidelong glance at it, full of subtlety, even of suspicion."

But Woolf's notion that the change of sex will change the identity shows up again, when Orlando later thinks, "Better is it ... to be clothed with poverty and ignorance, which are the dark garments of the female sex; better to leave the rule and discipline of the world to others; better be quit of martial ambition, the love of power, and all the other manly desires if so one can more fully enjoy the most exalted raptures known to the humane spirit, which are ... contemplation, solitude, love."

Woolf even foresees the Bechdel Test when she writes, "'It is well known', says Mr S. W., 'that when they lack the stimulus of the other sex, women can find nothing to say to each other.'" In other words, the only time two women have a conversation it is about a man. [-ecl]

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Quote of the Week:

I got a letter from the IRS. Apparently I owe them \$800. So I sent them a letter back. I said, "If you'll remember, I fastened my return with a paper clip, which according to your very own latest government Pentagon spending figures will more than make up for the difference."

--Emo Philips