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Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery

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Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery

Abstract

This is a film review of *Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery* (2022), directed by Rian Johnson.

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Author Notes

Ken Derry is Associate Professor, Teaching Stream, in the Department of Historical Studies at the University of Toronto Mississauga (UTM). Since 2011 he has been a member of the editorial board of the *Journal of Religion and Film*, and from 2012 to 2018 he was the Co-chair of the Religion, Film, and Visual Culture Group for the American Academy of Religion. Together with John Lyden he co-edited *The Myth Awakens* (2018), the first book on the Star Wars franchise by scholars of religion. Aside from religion and film his teaching and research interests include considerations of religion in relation to literature, violence, popular culture, pedagogy, and Indigenous traditions. He is the recipient of the 2013 UTM Teaching Excellence Award.



***Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery* (2022), dir. Rian Johnson**

Trailer: <https://youtu.be/SqHbLeW1B2k>

Certain genres of storytelling naturally lend themselves to religious allegorizing. Prison films are about morality and freedom; it's no wonder that they are filled with Christ-figures, from *Cool Hand Luke* to *Shawshank Redemption* to *Alien*³. Science fiction presents us with the mystery of the infinite beyond, and aliens who may save us (*The Day the Earth Stood Still*), destroy us (the entire *Alien* franchise), or existentially challenge us (*Arrival*). Whodunnits too are about morality and mystery, and may sometimes also grapple with core existential questions. Murder puzzles become springboards to reflect on the meaning of life, and to wonder at the distances between the generosity and the cruelty of humans. Written and directed by Rian Johnson, *Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery* is very much this kind of whodunnit. It is a parable of kindness and comeuppance.

When this film had its world premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival, we were asked to avoid including details in our reviews that would spoil the mystery. So in what follows, I will do my best to be circumspect.

The plot of Johnson's earlier film, *Knives Out*, centered on that old but engaging chestnut, the locked room murder. An apparently impossible crime! The gears in the detective's brain – and the audience's – immediately start whirring. *Glass Onion* gives us a similarly reliable trope, the closed circle of suspects. One of them *must* be the killer, as they are trapped together in a remote or inaccessible location: a country manor, a moving train, or – in this case – a private island. Tech billionaire (and Elon Musk parody) Miles Bron has invited a small group of his closest friends to this island to join him for a weekend murder mystery party. Which *of course* turns into the mystery of an actual murder.

The film's action is set in motion when several friends who work in disparate fields (science, fashion, politics, online influencing) receive an incredibly complex puzzle box. Solving the puzzle reveals their invitation from Bron. They arrive at the boat launch to encounter two unexpected guests: their former friend, Andi Brand, and the famous detective Benoit Blanc. Once on the island, we start to learn more about each character. Secrets are teased. Innuendos are flung. Tensions rise.

Eventually the guests meet for dinner, disciples that Bron has brought together for what turns into a Last Supper: a meal leading to betrayal and death. And one person at the table, we will learn, is the Christ-figure, scapegoated and suffering for the sins of others.

The puzzle box at the start is the first example of a pattern in the film. Something is shown to us that has one apparent meaning. But later we find it has a deeper, more important meaning. The thing is, this deeper meaning was never hidden from us, even though we didn't

see it. (Or at least I didn't see it! And certainly, most of the characters in the film miss these meanings as well. Even the famous detective berates himself at one point for not accounting the obvious. So I feel I'm in good company.)

It's a recurring, clever, application of the film's central metaphor, which is also its title: glass onion. As Blanc himself explains at one point, a glass onion appears to have layers of complexity but the truth is apparent the whole time. We simply need to look, and trust what we see.

The idea of the glass onion applies most obviously to unravelling the layers of confusion and misdirection surrounding the murder mystery – only to reveal what we already should have known. It also applies to the film's core teaching. Most of the characters are miserable, living complicated, empty lives of deceit and self-interest, working desperately to retain scraps of wealth or power. But they all remember a time when they were happy, when they had genuine friendships, when everyone wasn't literally and figuratively stabbing each other in the back. The truth is simple, and very Jesus-y, and would have set them free long ago if they had just seen what was right in front of them: treat others as you would like to be treated.

It's not just the venal group of suspects who are unhappy, though: so is Blanc. In somewhat shocking contrast to the calm, confident detective we met in *Knives Out*, when we first see him here he is lost, depressed. In part this is due to pandemic lockdown ennui. But also, it turns out that *his* treasure is mystery itself. Without one, it seems, he lacks meaning and purpose. But even with one, meaning and purpose are fleeting. He has yet to solve the puzzle of his own life.

All of this makes the film sound almost Swedish in its seriousness, as if made from a lost Ingmar Bergman script. But one of the best tricks that *Glass Onion* pulls off – just as

Knives Out did – is balancing real thoughtfulness with humor and satire. That is an incredibly difficult tonal mix to achieve successfully. This is a movie that incorporates both genuinely moving discussions of suicide and grief, and the ridiculous sight of giant ex-wrestler Dave Bautista in a tiny bathing suit with a holstered gun on his hip. Also, despite making sincere points about kindness and community, the film nevertheless lures us into feeling very good indeed when terrible people who have hurt others get what’s coming to them, sometimes apocalyptically. Which, of course, is also kind of Jesus-y.