

Tom, Thanks for The Da Vinci Code

October 30, 2019

THE DA VINCI CODE (2006)

Directed by Ron Howard

Written by Akiva Goldsman & Dan Brown

Starring Audrey Tautou, Ian McKellan, Paul Bettany, & Tom Hanks as Robert Langdon

Subjectivity and objectivity are fickle constructs. We purport to believe in the importance of individualism and acceptance, but this is only tested as often as one's subjections are challenged. Let's pretend it's a subjective opinion that banana chocolate chip muffins are the best muffins (I tend to think it's an objective fact, but for instance). To say banana chocolate chip muffins are the best muffins is non-threatening to the beliefs of those who prefer blueberry. Blueberry muffin people simply disagree, and life goes on. But if it were to be decreed by a governing body, carved in stone, and enforced that blueberry muffin people should submit that banana chocolate chip muffins are better, there would be push-back. Differing subjective beliefs may coexist, but objective facts don't enjoy the same luxury, and with this, we have the root of every religious war since the dawn of time. Members of a certain religious ideology don't care what others believe as much as they care that others' beliefs don't challenge their own. This is just one of many ways theologies are like muffins. They're also both seductive and difficult to digest in whole. Anyway, I've torched the metaphor.

Religious egoism is at the heart of so many of history's great divisive stalemates. A gentle example came in 2004 when everybody went wild over a book called *The Da Vinci Code*. Okay, a *very* gentle example. What should have been no more than an effective layover time-suck was the hot topic of avid readers and non-readers alike. Born to be a drug store paperback in the tradition of James Patterson Featuring Someone, it grew to be a heavy, coffee table slab of rich acrylic stock and vibrant prints of the Louvre's finest, found in the households of any and all demographics. It was massively popular, and so too, massively objected. Using some clever manipulations of art history's inconclusion, and the convenient mystery of ancient societies, the novel posits that the Catholic Church is guilty of the conspiracy cover-up of an existing bloodline of Jesus Christ, in the interest of maintaining dominance over the rightful heir to civilization's worship: women. Beliefs challenged, people of a certain faith protested *The Da Vinci Code*.

At this time, I was quietly trying my best to be thirteen. I hadn't yet clasped for the agency of fashion, hairstyle, extracurricular hobbies, or any other typical way a child finds their lane. I'd been in Sunday School for most of my life, and was finally starting to connect with it, though only really as a social arena. I was making friends, and so I guess I felt I belonged. Around then, I started reading *The Da Vinci Code*. My friend Michael said it was good, and Michael only liked good things. I was decidedly invested before realizing the book was having a public feud with my newfound centre for personal welcome. Frightened by my heathenism, I emailed one of the catechistic organizers to ask if it was okay for me to read and enjoy *The Da Vinci Code*. "Is this book my one-way ticket to eternal damnation?" "No," she said. "It's just a book." How refreshingly level-headed. Through this thinking, she and I would be labelled, by DVC's Bishop Aringarosa, "Cafeteria Catholics."

By the time of the film's release, the hissing and bonfires had stopped; probably because the outrage grew tiresome, though I prefer to imagine TH's grace has the power to resolve all theistic unrest (in spite of his shaggy Robert Langdon hair, which is truly no one's religion). The movie's just a movie, and what's more, it's Hanks' foray into film franchisement; a convention that's grown to dominate cinema in general. Though I doubt a Dan Brown extended universe is in the works at Apple TV Plus, it has allowed for TH and Ron Howard to team-up three times for further installments of Langdon's adventure pattern. On the other side of *Da Vinci Code* Mania, this character has indeed turned out to be another in a long line of recycled male avatars, in brick-shaped paperbacks, servicing a reliable procedural thriller; ie. Tom Clancy's Jack Ryan, James Patterson's Alex Cross, Lee Child's Jack Reacher, Clive Cussler's Dirk Pitt, and so on. Routinely, Robert Langdon, a reluctant Indiana Jones, is called out of his classroom to solve a mystery of ancient symbology only he can solve. These characters are deliberately written vague so the reader can better project themselves into the adventure. It's effective in making the written material

delicious, but it doesn't translate easily to screen, and thus, TH comes off a bit wooden. But that's the character! On point as always, sir.

Upon rewatching, I actually found the story rather tame. Langdon's escorted to a grisly murder scene, in an iconic Parisian art museum, to decrypt the meaning behind the victim having been posed to resemble Da Vinci's sketch of the Vitruvian Man. The victim's estranged granddaughter, Sophie (Audrey Tautou), intervenes to prevent Langdon incriminating himself, and the two embark on a fugitive's scavenger hunt that ultimately determines Sophie is in fact a direct descendent of Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene. She can even cure Langdon's claustrophobia with her healing touch. Honestly, it's a pretty goofy plot, and it doesn't much relate to the titular artist beyond the first act.

The Da Vinci Code really is "just a book," and it doesn't claim to be nonfiction. But it was enough to intimate some people's core ideals because of its audacity to scrutinize their own goofily plotted book. After all, when is "just a book" an objective fact and when is it more complicated? It's scary to have to audit the philosophies you believe give you belonging. It's not even about the content of those beliefs, it's about the fight to remain tethered in a void of meaning. Who would I be, if forced to accept that banana chocolate chip are in fact an inferior muffin? Thankfully, such an Earth-shattering day will never come. If you dare disagree, then I suppose it's war.

Thx!