

1/3 1 BLAIR WITCH HORROR

\$23 MILL BO 2126 SCREENS R 89 MINUTES DVD/combo

James Allen McCune (TV---SHAMELESS, STATE OF AFFAIRS, THE DEAD DIARIES, THE WALKING DEAD)

Arriving in theaters in the summer of 1999 on a wave of hype, Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez's [The Blair Witch Project](#) was a hyperrealist antidote to the post-*Scream* horror landscape of winking, postmodern slashers. Myrick and Sánchez went to great lengths to achieve a sense of realness, hiring unknown actors and sending them out into the woods on their own to film each other camping out and hiking around while the directors tortured them at night with loud, scary noises. The finished film was so convincingly real because it was, in part, a genuine record of three hungry, agitated, sleep-deprived people getting screwed with by forces beyond their control.

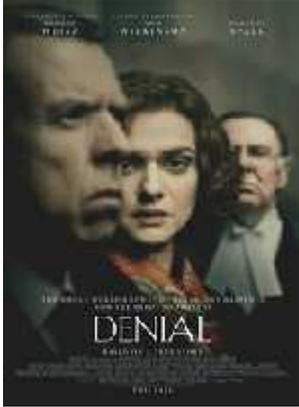
The basic outlines of the story haven't changed much though. James (James Allen McCune), the brother of Heather, one of the filmmakers who went missing in [The Blair Witch Project](#), discovers new footage posted online purporting to show the eponymous ghoulie. Believing his sister may still be alive, he heads to the Black Hills with some buddies: Ashley (Corbin Reid), Peter (Brandon Scott), and Lisa (Callie Hernandez), the last of whom is making a documentary about James's experience. They're joined by the dirtbag couple (Wes Robinson and Valorie Curry) who found the footage and insist on tagging along. From here, *Blair Witch* compresses the narrative of the original—aimless hiking during the day alternating with mysterious horrors at night—while significantly expanding the final confrontation with the Blair Witch.



The film thus takes the classic approach to sequel-making: telling essentially the same story as the original while expanding every everything from the number of principal characters, thus allowing for additional scares, to the number of cameras. While the original used only two cameras, one DV and one 16mm, this film employs several, including tiny earpiece cameras worn constantly by James and his friends. Everybody is filming everybody else all the time, which allows Wingard to cut between multiple POV shots within a given scene, making much of the film play like a *Peep Show* episode.

As the scares ratchet up, Wingard employs a number of lengthy single-shot sequences that feel like the Twitch stream of some survival-horror video game. Wingard ultimately seems interested in the found-footage approach less for its enhanced verisimilitude than for the immersive possibilities of inhabiting a character's perspective in long, unbroken stretches. Wedding its jittery first-person camerawork with an assaultive, sensory-overload aesthetic helps make it work almost as well as the original.

This is for those who rented **BAD MOMS, DON'T BREATHE, LIGHTS OUT, NEIGHBORS 2 and THE CONJURING 2.**



1/3 3 DENIAL DRAMA

\$4 MILL BO 726 SCREENS PG-13 110 MINUTES
DVD/ BLU RAY

**Rachael Weisz (YOUTH, OZ THE GREAT AND POWERFUL,
360, THE DEEP BLUE SEA)**

**Tom Wilkinson (SNOWDEN, THE CHOICE, UNFINISHED
BUSINESS, THE GRAND BUDAPEST HOTEL, FELONY, THE
LONE RANGER)**

Based on the book by the noted Holocaust historian Deborah Lipstadt, Mick Jackson's *Denial* dramatizes her infamous legal battle with the English Holocaust denier David Irving, a once reputable historian who sued Lipstadt for libel after she denigrated his work in one of her books. The film chronicles the case, which notoriously put the veracity of the Holocaust on trial, from its inception to the final verdict. The outcome of the trial forever ruined Irving's professional reputation and served as an important precedent in the legal history of the Holocaust, whose existence was subsequently no longer deemed to be an acceptable topic of debate in a British court of law.

The film, written by playwright David Hare, is a passionate defense of fact over opinion. It's a vindication of logic and reason against those that employ specious conspiracy theories to support all kinds of racist agendas. Ostensibly about the anti-Semitism that continues to lie, barely concealed, just beneath the surface of Western society, the film is more a celebration of the often unsung defenders of truth—academics, scholars, and activists—who put in untold hours of thankless labor to generate the knowledge upon which social and scientific progress depends. Equally, it's about the need to debunk pseudoscience and lies that masquerade as facts, which are dangerous precisely because they offer a simplified view of the world that appeals to humanity's need to make sense of our increasingly complex reality.



Denial humanizes Irving while never letting up on its attack of his abhorrent ideas, debunking them one by one until he's a broken husk of a man, stripped of all dignity and credibility. As played by Timothy Spall, Irving is as a delusional social climber whose talents as a historian were increasingly perverted by his growing passion for the ideas espoused by Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich. Spall captures Irving's fascinating combination of insecurity and braggadocio, showing him to be a patent racist whose hate was so deeply ingrained that he was incapable of seeing it. One almost feels sympathy for Irving when he pitifully denies being an anti-Semite, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, because he truly believes that his findings are based on sound scholarship. Blinded to how his prejudices have perverted his work, he's a textbook example of a pathological bigot whose racist view of the world leads him to see himself as a victim of some vast conspiracy out to get him, when in fact he's the one with the all-consuming agenda.

In a deeply sober film with an almost entirely British cast, Rachel Weisz's performance as Lipstadt brings a welcome sense of verve and even a certain campiness to the proceedings. Both a complement to and the obverse of Spall's Irving, Weisz plays up Lipstadt's Queens accent and her general American brashness to highlight how foreign this English trial appeared to the Jewish-American scholar. As an American and the one being tried, Lipstadt is horrified by the British legal concept that one is guilty until proven innocent, the reverse of her native tradition. As a Jew and a Holocaust historian, she's appalled that the burden of proof is on her, while the liar that accused her gets to make a mockery of both her profession and her tragic heritage.

Will rent as well as **PAPA HEMINGWAY IN CUBA, THE INFILTRATOR, OUR KIND OF TRAITOR, THE DARKNESS, GENIUS and CRIMINAL.**



**1/3 2 MIDDLE SCHOOL: THE WORST YEARS OF
MY LIFE DRAMA**
\$22 MILL BO 2287 SCREENS PG 92 MINUTES
DVD/BLU RAY

**Laura Graham (TV—THE GILMORE GIRLS, PARENTHOOD,
WEB THERAPY—FILM—MAX, JOSHY, IT’S KIND OF A FUNNY
STORY, EVAN ALMIGHTY)**

Middle school is, for many, an uncommonly rotten time—three or four years of foul body odor, social alienation, and volcanic hormonal eruptions. It’s a time of free-floating pubescent despair and violent, unruly emotions aching to break free of the stultifying regimentation of the school bell.

So who can blame Rafe Khatchadorian (Griffin Gluck), the rebellious hero of *Middle School: The Worst Years of My Life*, for replacing that school bell with a fart machine? Or for plastering his school’s hallways in colored Post-it notes? Or for dumping bright pink goop on his principal’s head? He’s fighting the good fight against his school’s rigid code of conduct, enforced with an iron fist by rule-mad Principal Dwight (Andy Daly). After Dwight destroys Rafe’s beloved sketchbook in retaliation for a less-than-flattering caricature of the principal, Rafe sets out to surreptitiously break every rule in the school handbook.

Based on the 2011 novel of the same name by James Patterson and Chris Tebbetts, *The Worst Years of My Life* doesn’t capture much of the emotional turmoil of being a tween, but it does offer a fitfully amusing and lightly subversive attack on the conformism of the American school system, particularly targeting the soul-sucking tedium of standardized testing. Dwight’s obsession with ensuring high scores on an assessment test has turned him into a quasi-dictator, stamping out all signs of dissent, creativity, or individual thought among the student body. Rafe’s series of rule-breaking pranks escalates into an insurrection against the mechanization of education.

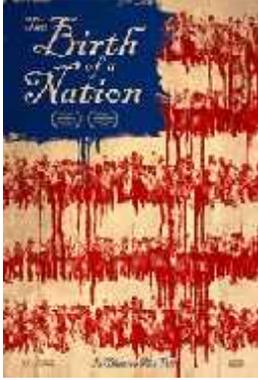


For a film extolling the virtues of thinking outside the box, however, *The Worst Years of My Life* is a pretty by-the-numbers affair, hitting all the familiar school-movie highlights: the bully, the crush, the goofy best friend, the stuffed-shirt principal, the one teacher who sees a kid’s true potential. Unimaginatively directed and indifferently shot, the film never establishes a distinctive voice for itself, instead leaning on some bouncy musical cues, wacky foley effects, and “hip” references to keep up the momentum, such as a lecture based around a strange analogy involving Drake and Future to explain, of all things, NAFTA. Even the film’s animated asides, intended as visualizations of Rafe’s restless creativity, feel merely perfunctory.

While the film is rarely clever enough to elicit any real laughs, its good-natured irreverence and cast of comic ringers—including Daly, Retta, Rob Riggle, Adam Pally, and Lauren Graham, all having fun with their cartoonish roles—manages to keep things winsomely breezy. Daly in particular strikes an amusing balance between despotic ruthlessness and blithe dorkiness that rescues his character from the screeching buffoon it easily could have been.

Unfortunately, a maudlin plot strand involving Rafe’s younger brother who died of cancer, which then caused his father to leave the family, disrupts the film’s light-hearted tone, unnecessarily attempting to wring tears out of a story that basically amounts to *Dirty Work Jr.* It also has the effect of over-psychologizing Rafe and robbing his story of its subversive charm by explaining his rebellion as a product of grief rather than a just response to a repressive education system. We don’t need overwritten tragedies to explain why a kid might fight back against the powers that be; we just need to remember what it was like to be in middle school.

This will rent as well as **GHOSTBUSTERS, THE BFG, KEANU, NINE LIVES, THE BOSS and BIG FAT GREEK WEDDING 2.**



1/10 3 THE BIRTH OF A NATION DRAMA
\$17 MILL BO 1956 SCREENS R 120 MINUTES
DVD/COMBO 28 DAYS BEFORE REDBOX

Nate Parker (EDEN, BEYOND THE LIGHTS, NON-STOP, RED HOOK SUMMER)

Penelope Ann Miller (SAVING LINCOLN, MEN OF A CERTAIN AGE, CARLITO'S WAY, THE ARTIST, THE MESSENGER, THE DEAL)

Nate Parker's *The Birth of a Nation*, a portrait of the prophet on the road to Jerusalem, is indebted to *The Confessions of Nat Turner* for both its understanding of Turner's "work" and its rendering of his faith. From the sounds of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" to the avenging angels and immanent eclipses of what Julia Ward Howe once described as God's "terrible swift sword," the film traces its protagonist's progress from scriptural reverence to earthly revolution—a confession on the Augustinian model, suffused with the spirit of the convert. Run through with thoughtful allusions to African rituals and Christian texts, the film gathers strength from religion, only to squander it on shallow connections to the Civil War and the politics of the present, reducing Turner's prophecies to their most mechanistic meanings.

Carrying childhood memories of both the slave-owning regime's brute force and its meager interstices, Turner (Parker), witness to his father's confrontation with a malevolent slave catcher, Raymond Cobb (Jackie Earle Haley), and taught to read by the plantation mistress, Elizabeth Turner (Penelope Ann Scott), emerges, at first, as a multifaceted figure. He has the ear of his master, Samuel Turner (Armie Hammer), but tends the embers of his hatred with sidelong glances and a furtive brow; he mutters "good Lord" at the first sight of Cherry (Aja Naomi King), his future wife, but approaches his role as the shepherd of his people with sober determination.

Though the film's fleeting glimpses of slave auctions and household chores, often shot in wan, sallow light, lend his depiction of plantation life little texture, Parker succeeds in illustrating the convergence of Turner's religious and political convictions. In *The Birth of a Nation*, the era's common referents, such as cotton bolls and columned homes, are but stations of the cross; it's the blood-soaked corn, or the ecstatic sermon, that suggest the rebel's genesis. As Samuel contracts Turner out to neighboring planters, for instance, collecting his chattel's wages in an upturned white palm, the preacher encounters more than enough evil to discover his voice. After seeing a chained man's teeth chiseled from his mouth during one unimaginable punishment, he implores his congregants to "sing to Him a new song": an insurrectionist's message, secreted away in God's word.



Indeed, the notion that the rarest form of resistance in the annals of American slavery, the full-scale revolt, might not submit so easily to the constraints of cinematic narrative seems not to occur to Parker. His noble endeavor, which is to transform *The Confessions of Nat Turner* into a patriotic parable, crashes on the shoals of his subject's complexities, on the unthinkable courage required to challenge head-on the signal atrocity committed in the West between the end of the Middle Ages and the Holocaust. It was, of course, Turner's rough-edged, Biblical sense that he was an instrument of God's will that pressed him to assume the prophet's mantle, though by the time *The Birth of a Nation* arrives at the red, white, and blue bunting of his execution, the revelation at the heart of his attempted revolution seems once again lost in history's mists.

The climactic violence of Turner's rebellion, with its reprisals and ambushes and maudlin strings, thus strips its animating force of his penetrating insight into the system's central contradiction, its Achilles'

heel, which was the fact that its moral justification, Christianity, also contained the seeds of its demise. In the end, *The Birth of a Nation* sands down Turner's understanding of justice until it fits into our own, modern hermeneutic, and so neglects the lasting consequence of the change he wrought. Even the film's most awful, forthright act of invention, a montage of the uprising's aftermath that culminates in black bodies hanging from weeping willows, appears to admit the difficulty, the impossibility, of capturing the country's original sin. The song that sets the sequence in motion is Nina Simone's "Strange Fruit," with its mournful mention of "blood on the leaves, blood at the root," but *The Birth of a Nation* is closer kin to Eve's apple, a story we already know.

This will rent as well as **THE INFILTRATOR, FREE STATE OF JONES, GENIUS, MEET THE BLACKS** and **THE PERFECT MATCH**.



1/10 1 DEEPWATER HORIZON ACTION
\$61 MILL BO 2856 SCREENS PG-13 107 MINUTES
DVD/COMBO

Mark Wahlberg (DADDY'S HOME, THE SHOOTER, TED 2, LONE SURVIVO, THE FIGHTER)
Kurt Russell (FURIOUS 7, GRINDHOUSE, EXECUTIVE DECISION, TEQUILA SUNRISE, THE MEAN SEASON)

Peter Berg's *Deepwater Horizon* is bookended by the voice of the real Mike Williams, an electrician on the eponymous BP-owned oil-drilling rig that exploded off the Louisiana coast in 2010, unleashing millions of gallons of crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico. Taking audio of Williams's congressional testimony, the filmmakers first introduce, then recapitulate a story of corporate negligence and utter chaos around one of the few undeniable heroes of the horrific disaster. This is nothing new for Berg, who tends to favor rough but noble protagonists, but where his last few films largely acted as justifications for the military-industrial complex of the 21st century, his latest is an equally passionate rebuke to the destructiveness of greed.

Much of the film unfurls as a dizzying fusillade of jargon, with Mike (Mark Wahlberg) and others aboard the Deepwater Horizon speaking technical language to each other at the pace of Aaron Sorkin characters. Upon flying out to the offshore rig, Mike and his manager, Jimmy Harrell (Kurt Russell), swiftly take note of numerous issues with the rig's equipment, from inconsistent phone connections to more pressing structural weaknesses. Jimmy grills on-board BP executives over their refusal to adequately test anything, much less pause the rig's operations for necessary repairs, and he laces rhetorical questions to them with almost Socratic sarcasm, using the most complicated and precise language he can to hammer home how much more qualified he is to make safety calls than penny-pinching suits.

Given the foregone conclusion of the Deepwater Horizon catastrophe, the film nimbly eschews any attempt to create a sense of normalcy aboard the rig, generating a constant state of tension even when Mike is still at home with his family, as in an early scene in which his young daughter, Sydney (Stella Allen), recreates the rig's process with a Coke can and inadvertently sends soda spraying all over the kitchen. Yet the omission of any false sense of calm also locks the early scenes into hollow theatrics, filled with Mike and Jimmy's snappy comebacks to the BP executives' blasé disregard, embodied most vilely by Donald Vidrine (John Malkovich), who cannot hide his sneer at what he perceives to be the softness of the Deepwater Horizon crew to simply keep working despite their misgivings. Through sheer repetition, Jimmy's furiousness loses its bite, rendering a scene of Jimmy receiving a safety award just as the rig gets ready to blow as nothing more than flippant irony.



When the rig's drilling at last triggers the pent-up gas under the seafloor, the resulting maelstrom finds Berg more naturally in his element: staging effects-heavy, blockbuster-level pandemonium. The consuming eruptions of mud, gas, and, at last, fire, are stunning for the way the images, buried in dozens of edits, capture the disorientation of the swift, total collapse of the station, which turns into one colossal fireball so quickly that many workers on board don't even realize there's a problem until everything around them is aflame.

This will rent as well as **STAR TREK: BEYOND, WAR DOGS, GHOSTBUSTERS, THE LEGEND OF TARZAN, NEIGHBORS 2** and **CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE**.



1/10 2 KEVIN HART: WHAT NOW

STAND UP COMEDY

\$25 MILL BO 2567 SCREENS R 106 MINUTES

DVD/COMBO 28 DAYS BEFORE RED BOX

Kevin Hart (CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE, RIDE ALONG, RIDE ALONG 2)

As a stand-up comedian, Kevin Hart frequently walks the line between self-aggrandizement and self-deprecation. Both of those qualities are illustrated in the framing story conceived for his latest concert film, *Kevin Hart: What Now?* It's a parody of James Bond films with Hart as "Agent 0054," who faces off against Don Cheadle, among others, in a casino poker game, with Halle Berry by Hart's side. The sheer narcissism of Hart imagining himself as a variation on the iconically suave British super-spy is frequently subverted by the comedian's own loudmouth clumsiness. When Berry explains to a fellow bar patron what she sees in Agent 0054, her compliments about his sensitivity and intelligence are belied by the goofball behavior Hart exhibits at the poker table, which includes pouring beer into a martini glass.



Hart's willingness to make himself look foolish even as he acknowledges his celebrity is on full display throughout *Kevin Hart: What Now?*, which, after 20 minutes devoted to spoofing 007, is basically a concert film of the comedian's performance at Lincoln Financial Field in Philadelphia, his hometown, on August 30, 2015. The show broke the record for being the highest-attended comedy event in history—something that Hart triumphantly acknowledges at the end of his set, as if that in and of itself was a remarkable accomplishment beyond confirming his status as one of the biggest comedy stars in the world.

It's a strange high-water mark to be proud of, because Hart's material is a weird fit for the gargantuan dimensions of a football arena, as it's almost exclusively limited to his own personal life and the observations that flow from it. His relationships with members of his extended family provide much of the grist for his set. One of Hart's more incisive bits revolves around his worries that his children, both of whom attend private school in Los Angeles, may be growing up without the "edge" he was forced to develop as a child. Hart notes that growing up and witnessing peers get hurt or killed represented the lowest points of life in inner-city Philadelphia; for his son, however, the greatest tragedy is WiFi that doesn't work around the house.

That routine hints at a duality at the heart of Hart's comedy, at least as it's developed over the years: He simultaneously basks in his privilege while also worrying about it. A bit toward the end of his set about his struggles while trying to relieve himself in an airport bathroom is, to some degree, defanged when his worst nightmare in this scenario is realized: a fan trying to take a picture of him while he's sitting on a toilet. As committed as he remains in commenting on universal human experiences like his body forcing him to take a dump in a public restroom, Hart can't help but filter those observations through the

prism of his own fame-induced circumstances, leaving it up to his viewers whether or not to lend him their empathy.

This will rent as well as **CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE, NEIGHBORS 2, THE BOSS, SISTERS,** and **SAUSAGE PARTY.**



1/17 1 THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN THRILLER

**\$62 MILL BO 2987 SCREENS R 122 MINUTES
DVD/COMBO 28 DAYS BEFORE REDBOX**

**Emily Blunt (SICARIO, INTO THE WOODS, THE HUNTSMAN:
WINTERS WAR, EDGE OF TOMORROW)**

Rachel (Emily Blunt), the traumatized divorcee at the center of Tate Taylor's *The Girl on the Train*, drinks away her days on a Metro North train running between Ardsley-on-Hudson and Grand Central Terminal. Despite her regular commute, it's clear she's going nowhere. Every day, Rachel's train passes her old house, where her ex-husband, Tom (Justin Theroux), remains with new wife, Anna (Rebecca Ferguson), and an infant daughter, but the commuter's red-nosed, bleary-eyed gaze becomes fixed on the home of Tom's neighbors, Megan (Haley Bennett) and Scott Hipwell (Luke Evans).

Whenever Rachel's train passes the Hipwells' well-appointed house, she witnesses the couple in varying stages of coitus. Rachel, miserable despite being regularly blessed with this steamy contrivance, idealizes the couple's passion until one fateful commute, when she sees Megan kissing another man. Soon after, Megan disappears, and Rachel transforms from a depressed voyeur to the drunken amateur detective who's also a police suspect. This predictable thriller subsequently takes viewers on the opposite journey, foregoing its promise of twisty adult thrills in favor of a grimly deadpan lecture about messy truths and false perceptions.

Rachel's unreliability is quickly established through a series of gnomic statements and a set of jaundiced, slow-motion visions redolent of a true-crime reenactment. She's concurrently obsessed with the film's two other narrators, Megan and Anna. The latter is weary from exhausting trips to the farmer's market, while Megan, a self-proclaimed "master of reinvention," seems most skilled at getting any man in earshot to drop their pants.



Taylor is quick to establish an elaborate tripartite narrative: title cards that denote switches in points of view, and still more title cards that set up a complex temporal structure. The film's present-day action is propelled by Megan's disappearance and Rachel's continued harassment of Tom and Anna; its flashbacks are meant to gradually flesh out the backgrounds of the three leads, trudging through their mistakes and traumas in the distant past back toward Megan's vanishing. Rather than offer any positive definition of its heroines, the film saddles them with tragedies and ugly aspersions: Infertility and adultery are running themes, and the closest the screenplay gets to the zeitgeisty topicality of [Gone Girl](#). The only shred of wit in *The Girl on the Train* comes at the expense of the film's idiot men, whose computer passwords are the names of the women with whom they're having affairs.

It's a dumb joke, but at least it's a little campy. The same can't be said of the lazy performances or plodding, chaotic structural gambits. With a parodically high volume of shots of women waking up from traumatic nightmares and fantasies, the film plays like a jilted lover's spin on [Inception](#): It's rarely clear when Taylor's toggling back to the present from a flashback, and the film's teasing air of unreliability yields a few dreams and visions that appear to be false. Maybe this is all an echo of Rachel's trajectory from unreliable villain to flawed heroine, but Blunt's unnervingly committed performance is an awkward fit with the film's array of one-note heroes and villains.

This will rent as well as **WAR DOGS, HELL OF HIGH WATER, NERVE, MONEY MONSTER, THE FINEST HOURS** and **RACE**.



1/17 2 **KEEPING UP WITH THE JONESES**

COMEDY

\$16 MILL BO 3022 SCREENS **PG-13** 105 MINUTES
DVD/COMBO 28 DAYS BEFORE REDBOX

Zach Galifiniakis (THE HANGOVER 1, II, III, BIRDMAN, WHAT HAPPENS IN VEGAS, INTO THE WILD, THE CAMPAIGN)
Jon Hamm (TV'S MAD MEN---FILM—MILLION DOLLAR ARM, BRIDESMAIDS, FRIENDS WITH KIDS, THE TOWN)

The thing about *Keeping Up with the Joneses* is that it appears sincere in its attempt to fill the comedy void that was left by *Desperate Housewives*. Wisteria Lane is now Maple Circle, where two government spies, Natalie and Tim Jones (Gal Gadot and Jon Hamm), move to in order to ingratiate themselves with Jeff Gaffney (Zach Galifianakis), a security company drone whose computer holds intel about an arms transaction. Natalie and Tim's poker faces may indicate how inherently good they are at protecting their secret identities.



As such, much of the film's "humor" derives from watching the sensibilities of folks who complain about the lines at Kinko's being "bananas" rub up against those of individuals who prioritize international travel above...feelings? Which is to say, the trite delineation between the Joneses and Jeff and his wife, Karen (Isla Fisher), would appear to set the stage for an open exchange of everyone's best attributes, which here boils down to wearing lace underwear, eating snake, DVRing *The Good Wife*, and smiling while indoor skydiving.

This will rent as well as **NEIGHBORS 2, THE HOLLARS, DON'T THINK TWICE, BAD MOMS, SAUSAGE PARTY** and **MOTHER'S DAY**.



1/17 1 OUIJA: ORIGIN OF EVIL HORROR

\$34 MILL BO 2349 SCREENS PG-13 104 MINUTES
DVD/COMBO

Elizabeth Reaser (TV---MAD MEN, GREY'S ANATOMY, THE GOOD WIFE)

Origin of Evil begins some 50 years prior to the events depicted in [Ouija](#), in 1967's Los Angeles, but filling in the past of Paulina Zander, played in the first film by Lynn Shaye, is primarily Flanagan's way of indulging his propensity for keying his formalist frights to his characters' subjectivities against a sea of polyester clothes, Eames furniture, and old Chevys. As Alice Zander (Elizabeth Reaser) drives her girls, Paulina (Annalise Basso) and Doris (Lulu Wilson), from school one day, the camera hangs close to the side of the vehicle while panning slowly to the right, collapsing our perception of the exterior world. For Flanagan, the artifice of his 1960s setting exists for him to stress in new ways how living with grief is not unlike being suspended in time.

Early in *Origin of Evil*, inside the home where Alice runs a racket in which she convinces locals that she can communicate with the dead, Doris casually watches a 1956 episode of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* titled "The Older Sister." The snippet glimpsed of the episode, which concerns Lizzie Borden and her relationship to her older sister, has a woman telling the young Borden that she's not what she expected. Flanagan cleverly places the show and his own film in conversation with one another, winking at their shared fixation on how families function while in the throes of bereavement.

In *Origin of Evil*, the spectacle by which Doris comes to be possessed by a dark, mouthless entity that may or may not be the spirit of her dead father is nearly as chilling as Alice's unquestioning acceptance of her little girl's crisis. The smoke and mirrors they put on for clients during the film's prologue becomes unnecessary once they can rely on Doris's new friend to slide the planchette across the Ouija board for them. And mother and daughter's grief spiral, rooted in a perverse spectacle of mutual and relaxed exploitation, is made all the more haunting by how unconventionally Flanagan springs his scares. The filmmaker realizes that the jump-scare-a-thon still reigns supreme, and he resists canned scare tactics almost at every turn: Ghoulies haunt the periphery of the frames, as if self-consciously refusing to jump out at us, and no vision here is more frightening than Doris casually watching television, her eyes milky and her mouth stretched to the ground.



Flanagan delights in using his camera to trace the movements of the Ouija board as it's lifted from its case and placed on a table, and to the left and right as characters peer through the planchette and at the spirits they fear it may reveal to them. But there's a certain lack of conviction to the way the Ouija board is incorporated into the story, and by the time the object ceases to matter at all, the film almost fatally succumbs to the hoariness of horror conventions, from exorcisms and vengeful spirits, that are trotted out with erratic abandon. Still, if these conventions ultimately feel a little too disconnected from the pains that inform the Zander family's almost cultish sense of grief, Flanagan's distinctive framing of a final torrent of scares allows the film to at least rise above the ranks of similar freak-outs whose potential for originality is perpetually held at bay by franchise demands.

This will rent like **10 CLOVERFIELD LANE, DON'T BREATHE, SAUSAGE PARTY, LIGHTS OUT, THE SHALLOWS** and **LONDON HAS FALLEN** did.



1/17 3 THE WHOLE TRUTH DRAMA

\$3 MILL BO 1126 SCREENS R 93 MINUTES DVD/ BLU RAY

Keanu Reeves (THE MATRIX, SPEED, POINT BREAK, JOHN WICK, BILL & TED'S EXCELLENT ADVENTURE, MY OWN PRIVATE IDAHO)

Renee Zellweger (WALK THE LINE, MY OWN LOVE SONG, LEATHERHEADS, BRIDGET JONES DIARY)

"All people lie," says Ramsey (Keanu Reeves), the cunning, cynical lawyer who agrees to defend a teenage client, Mike (Gabriel Basso), against charges that he murdered his father, Boone (Jim Belushi). In Nicholas Kazan's intricate screenplay for *The Whole Truth*, however, the truth lies in the flashbacks, all of them strategically placed to either, deny, or complicate the veracity of what various characters testify on the stand or in confidence.

In this context, the absence of a flashback to accompany a character's testimony is enough to immediately inspire skepticism in audiences. This structural gimmick marginally elevates Courtney Hunt's film above the level of a feature-length *Law & Order* episode, many of which depend on purely verbal revelations to advance its narrative. So, to a lesser extent, does Ramsey's voiceover narration, which Reeves delivers in the style of a hardboiled gumshoe in a detective noir—a pose of mastery over human nature that's gradually subverted as the plot twists pile up and he realizes the outcome of the trial he's participating in may not entirely be in his hands.

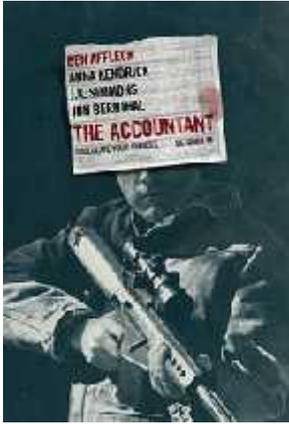
Courtney Hunt's film ultimately plays as little more than the cinematic equivalent of a trashy airport novel.

Still, *The Whole Truth* is basically a straightforward courtroom drama. Like the Kazan-scripted *Reversal of Fortune* before it, the film gains a lot of dramatic mileage out of the relatively unconventional premise of a lawyer having to try to discover the truth of a situation despite dealing with an unreliable client—in this case, one that won't even speak to his lawyer, as Mike mysteriously refuses to do for much of the film. The same skeptical view of the upper class that was prevalent in that earlier script also finds its way into *The Whole Truth*, with Boone painted as a loutish, domineering womanizer who also abuses and cheats on his long-suffering wife, Loretta (Renée Zellweger). He apparently has such a hold on those around him that, even after his death, almost everyone is afraid to tell the truth—another layer of near-conspiratorial deception that Ramsey has to wade through.



Another character offers a potential entry point into this unsavory world of sex and violence: Janelle (Gugu Mbatha-Raw), the daughter of a well-respected former lawyer who Ramsey brings on to be his "bullshit detector," and who's trying to bounce back from a stint at a mental institution. The deeper she wades into this case, however, the more she eventually becomes the film's most sympathetic and morally upright character. Or, at least, her moral uprightness might matter more if the characters had exuded any depth beyond the merely archetypal—mere chess pieces for Kazan to arrange his cleverly stacked deck of cards. The filmmakers are so disengaged from the psyches of its characters that *The Whole Truth* ultimately plays as little more than the cinematic equivalent of a trashy airport novel that will grip you in the moment before it dissolves from memory immediately afterward.

This will rent as well as **THE INFILTRATOR, GENIUS, CRIMINAL, STAND OFF, and NERVE.**



1/24 1 THE ACCOUNTANT THRILLER
\$52 MILL BO 2398 SCREENS R 128 MINUTES
DVD/COMBO 28 DAYS BEFORE REDBOX

Ben Affleck (ARGO, GOOD WILL HUNTING, GONE GIRL, THE TOWN, THE COMPANY MEN, STATE OF PLAY)
Anna Kendrick (THE HOLLARS, PITCH PERFECT 2, GET A JOB, INTO THE WOODS, THE LAST FIVE YEARS)
J. K. Simonds (TV—CLOSER, ARCHER, GRAVITY FALLS, MAJOR LAZER—FILM—WHIPLASH ZOOTOPIA)

Its concept, of high-functioning autistic bean counter Christian Wolff (Ben Affleck) doubling as a monstrously skilled killer, promises something offbeat in a year of tediously uniform multiplex offerings. It says something about the state of American films, however, that Chris, all antisocial glowering and single-minded focus on objectives, is scarcely distinguishable from your run-of-the-mill, blockbuster-headlining antihero.

In fairness to Affleck, he does duck many of the clichés that mar portrayals of autism. Chris's moments of uncontrollable emotion are almost entirely restricted to flashbacks of his childhood, and even the character's mannerisms—tapping fingers on tables, blowing on his hands before touching things—aren't lingered upon, instead performed with the absent-minded calm of settled routine. Affleck appears to recognize the fundamentally trashy core beneath O'Connor's sedate, measured direction and the film's generally somber tone, and he subtly plays up Chris's social interactions not for pity, but for oddly relatable comedy. Interrupted during a private lunch at one point, Chris doesn't become hostile, but his body language stiffens like a board, and the exasperation on his face as he endures small talk comes off as office humor. Later, when his more illicit activities draw heat and he must kill an attacker in front of people he knows, Chris comes out of his bloodlust shakily, remembering his nearby friends and jerking his arm upward in an awkward wave as if trying to offer a normal goodbye. It's the most engaging Affleck has been in years, despite playing such an alienated character.



Chris finds himself in the middle of two conflicts as *The Accountant* progresses. In one, a Treasury Department investigation headed by Director Raymond King (J.K. Simmons) and underling Marybeth Medina (Cynthia Addai-Robinson) seeks to discover Chris's true identity after tying his accounting work to laundering and bookkeeping activities by various international criminal organizations. Elsewhere, Chris attempts to lie low by taking a legitimate client, a robotics firm with a discrepancy in their books. Chris's preternatural number-crunching skills compress the timespan of technical research, with the accountant able to pore over more than a decade of complex, contradictory documents in a single night as montages of superimposed invoices and annual reports reflect his lightning-fast work.

But no sooner does Chris uncover the holes in the company's records than he's targeted by a corporate fixer (Jon Bernthal) and his team of mercenaries, who also set out to kill Dana Cummings (Anna Kendrick), the internal accountant who first discovered the expensive discrepancy in the robotics firm's dealings. From this point, the film juggles a "follow the money" procedural with this corporate espionage thriller, producing two competing tones that never reconcile into one fluid narrative. Dana is initially an amusing contrast to Chris, with his introverted, uncomfortable silences juxtaposed with the effervescent, ingratiatingly enthusiastic demeanor that's become Kendrick's stock in trade. As emotionally opposite colleagues united by a shared love of numbers, they make a fine pair, at times becoming an entertaining double act, particularly when Chris lets his guard down with genuine delight at her accounting acumen. Inevitably, however, Dana is reduced to a mere motivating element, a possible

love interest to stir his emotional involvement for the first time. Their relationship is indicative of all the shortcuts that the film's narrative takes, from the identity of the employer of the mercenaries to the true identity of Bernthal's character, all twists that can be spotted from a mile away.

The film does offer pleasantly choreographed action scenes, each shot with a sense of efficiency and clarity befitting the protagonist's attention to detail. *The Accountant's* final set piece in particular exudes a coherent functionality that used to be the baseline of Hollywood action filmmaking, as the crisp, unhurried editing follows Chris's furious but measured tear through mercenaries, weaving around a compound that's always laid out with spatial continuity. This sequence doesn't strive for spectacular viscera, aware that Chris's skills are frightening enough without feeling like you're on the receiving end of them. Ironically, by not attempting to oversell thrills, O'Connor has produced some of the few genuinely exciting action scenes of the year.

This will do as well as **WAR DOGS, MECHANIC 2, STAR TREK: BEYOND, BAD MOMS, GHOSTBUSTERS, INDEPENDENCE DAY: RESURGENCE** and **TRIPLE 9**.



1/24 1 INFERNO THRILLER

\$28 MILL BO 2349 SCREENS PG/13 121 MINUTES
DVD/BLU RAY

Tom Hanks (BIG, SULLY, THE MONEY PIT, SAVING PRIVATE RYAN, FOREST GUMP, THE GREEN MILE, PHILADELPHIA)
Felicity Jones (THE AMAZING SPIDERMAN 2, THE THEORY OF EVERYTHING, HYSTERIA, ALABATROSS)

You almost have to admire the cojones that it took for Dan Brown to name the fourth book in his Robert Langdon series after a seminal work of the literary canon. It's been more than a decade since *The Da Vinci Code* targeted an unexpectedly lucrative demographic of people who love both puzzles and Jesus, and in that time his commercial success has produced an equal and opposite reaction of critical disgust among those who value the beauty and possibility of language. *Inferno* is the latest escapade of Robert Langdon (Tom Hanks), everyone's favorite genius professor-cum-relatable schlub, and Ron Howard's adaptation retains the essential inanity of the source material.

Howard remains rooted to the tedious formula of Brown's text, which hits all the familiar beats as prior Langdon books. The motivation behind the character's latest adventure comes from a plague concocted by a young bioengineer, Bertrand Zobrist (Ben Foster), as a means of aggressively solving the world's overpopulation. Langdon, introduced as he groggily regains consciousness after suffering a head wound, is swiftly caught up in a race to find the virus that Zobrist, in a fit of hollow symbolism, has set to unleash at midnight. Langdon's sleuthing is aided by a series of arcane clues that Zobrist, for some unknown reason, leaves buried in references to Dante. Thankfully, the professor, who's so addled from his head trauma that he cannot recall the word "coffee," can still look at a copy of a Botticelli painting of Dante and immediately spot the details that differ from the original.

And so, Langdon sets off on yet another quest through various Old World landmarks, attempting not only to find the virus, but to stay abreast of a surprisingly well-armed World Health Organization that believes him to be in league with Zobrist, as well as a mysterious, clandestine private group that wants him expediently dispatched. This largely plays out in scenes of the professor sluggishly running around Italian cities, pausing just long enough to catch his breath and offer an introductory history of a painting or building.

Accompanying Langdon is Dr. Sienna Brooks (Felicity Jones), an English doctor and childhood prodigy who inexplicably works in the Florentine local hospital that admits him at the start of the film. Despite her fluency in Italian and her expert knowledge of Dante's



work, Brooks spends the first half of the film as a sounding board for Langdon's patronizing explanations, as well as the basic translations he offers in between relying on Brooks to talk to locals.

Howard, as he has with the prior Langdon films, makes the lethal mistake of taking this nonsense at face value, and he renders the professor's endless exposition with po-faced sincerity. At times, the filmmaker even manages to visually replicate the tedium of Brown's penchant for blunt detail, as in a shot of Brooks's framed newspaper story about herself going to college at age 12, as if that isn't the sort of thing her parents are more likely to keep around.

This is material that begs to be made fun of, but it's impossible to do so given how Howard reduces it to a dull spectacle of earnest puzzle-solving. The only reprieve from the film's tedium is Irrfan Khan's turn as the provost of the shadow security firm tailing Langdon. Khan instinctively understands that a man who runs a fixer organization from a battleship cruising international waters is inherently ridiculous, and he plays the part with a deadpan sense of irony that offers blessed relief from the seriousness of the rest of the film. The provost responds to subordinates with withering condescension, makes quick calls about assassinating targets as if modifying a schedule, and speaks with the bluntness of a man who's never feared stepping on anyone's toes. Khan only gets a few minutes of screen time overall, but he's such a buoyant presence that, at times, this miserable slog becomes genuinely entertaining.

This will rent as well as **WAR DOGS, 13 HOURS, MONEY MONSTER, NOW YOU SEE ME 2, and HARDCORE HENRY.**



1/24 3 THE LIGHT BETWEEN OCEANS DRAMA
1500 SCREENS \$15 MILL BO PG-13 133 MINUTES DVD

Michael Fassbender (X-MEN: APOCALYPSE, SLOW WEST, STEVE JOBS, 12 YEARS A SLAVE, PROMETHEUS)
Rachel Weisz (YOUTH, THE LOBSTER, COMPLETE UNKNOWN, THE BOURNE LEGACY, THE LOVELY BONES)

Tom (Michael Fassbender) is a World War I veteran. Like lots of survivors of war, he carries mental scars. His response to what he saw is to fall into an extremely quiet and reserved demeanor, not an unusual reaction. He takes the perfect job for someone who wishes to withdraw from everything. He is going to be a lighthouse keeper in a remote coastal town only reachable by boat. It's hard to be more alone than that.

To finalize his new working assignment, Tom must meet with those hiring him. Isabel (Alicia Vikander), a young woman living in the house where the meeting takes place immediately falls in love with him, even bringing up marriage, within a few hours. In a normal reality, this would scream crazy lady, but here it means true love, and they marry almost immediately. That is when I began to check out. Soon, the happy couple is living at the lighthouse, and trying to get pregnant, but multiple miscarriages derail their efforts. Misery abounds until a small boat washes up near the lighthouse. There is a dead man in the boat, but there is also an infant girl that is alive. Instead of trying to find out who the people are, they decide to keep the child and raise her as their own, despite Tom's misgivings. Until then, Tom had been portrayed as incredibly honest and a do-gooder.

That flies out the window. The rest of "The Light Between Oceans" is supposed to be a tortured examination of right and wrong and the ramifications of the dishonest actions of the couple, but by then, all I wanted was for it to end. A few moments that are supposed to be tense follow until it does mercifully end. If only everyone involved had drowned earlier or a monster had risen from the



sea and toppled the lighthouse on Tom and Isabel. Maybe that might have caused me to feel something.

This will rent as well as **CAPTAIN FANTASTIC, THE LOBSTER, LOVE & FRIENDSHIP, MOTHER'S DAY, MIRACLES FROM HEAVEN** and **MISS YOU ALREADY**.



1/31 1 BOO! A MADEA HALLOWEEN COMEDY
\$78 MILL BO 2348 SCREENS **PG-13** 102 MINUTES
DVD/BLU RAY

Tyler Perry (THE SINGLE MOM'S CLUB, A MADEA CHRISTMAS, MADEA GETS A JOB, MADEA'S WITNESS PROTECTION)

Boo! A Madea Halloween is a mediocre holiday-concept sequel for Tyler Perry's trademark character in light of her very funny *A Madea Christmas*, released two Christmases ago. With an emphasis on lengthy sequences that do little besides rehash tired jokes and a congested plot that echoes the worst tendencies of these Madea films, this is a project that regresses the character back to her old sloppy and borderline-intolerable ways.

The film is set on Halloween night and revolves around the Simmons family, particularly Brian (Tyler Perry) and his daughter, proving there is no continuity nor hope in trying to piece together how large Madea's extended family actually is. Brian is having a tough time disciplining his daughter Tiffany (Diamond White) as a single-parent, and now that it is Halloween night, she understandably wants to go out, to which he won't let her. Because he can't up the courage to lay down the law, he calls on her aunt Madea (also played by Perry) to do it as well.





1/31 3 **QUEEN OF KATWE** DRAMA
\$9 MILL BO 657 SCREENS PG 124 MINUTES
DVD/BLU RAY

Madina Nalwanga (Film debut)

Against the formulaic rhythms of the screenplay, adapted by William Wheeler from Tim Crothers's account of Phiona's real-life coming of age, *Queen of Katwe's* energetic images become a kind of syncopation, akin to the strains of hip-hop we hear in the shoreline market: "Bring the flavor to the fish, bring the flavor to the rice." Phiona, it turns out, possesses a preternatural talent for chess, soon able to see eight or nine moves ahead, and under Robert's tutelage, she and her classmates venture into the wealthier districts of Kampala, to Sudan and thence to Russia, competing in rarefied air.

As far as the film's structure goes, *Queen of Katwe* hews close to expectations. The charming Oyelowo spars with the understated Nyong'o as Robert, a dreamer, confronts Harriet, a pragmatist, to win her blessing for Phiona's training; snobs from more refined schools cast doubt on the hardscrabble team's abilities. *Queen of Katwe* is, in the narrative sense, a mere fulfillment of familiar tropes, though it approaches the genre's conventions with a light, funk-inflected touch. As one of Phiona's fellow students proclaims before their first big tournament, for instance, the "Richie Riches" are no match for the "Katwe Cool Kats," and the film evinces similar confidence.

Though the film's use of chess as a metaphor for life is rather strained ("You must never surrender,"



Robert tells Phiona as she topples her king), its perception of chess as a symbol of class divide, and of the resilience displayed by those for whom educational and economic opportunities are scarce, is potent. As Nair contrasts school and soccer uniforms with the Katwe kids' chaotic bursts of color, or glimpses stern, hard-edged Harriet in breathtaking shades of vermillion and gamboge, the form of the film, if not its plot, points to the possibilities that inhere in defying expectations.

As if to correct the worst commonplaces of Africans' depiction in the mainstream American cinema, *Queen of Katwe* focuses not on ceaseless strife or faceless crowds, but on the coexistence of distinct individuals within the collective, whether it be the family, the chess team, or the Kampalan slum. By the time the film returns to that first, forthright sequence, after all, we know that Phiona's choice of orange is a variation on her mother's color, and her step forth into the next challenge a variation on her mother's strength.

This will rent as well as **RACE, 45 YEARS, YOUTH, A WALK IN THE WOODS, and LES DANIELS' THE BUTLER.**