

Sisterly Reviews Lemony Snicket's: A Series Of Unfortunate Events

Andrea Ariano and Tanya Boulanger

In this series of reviews, our resident sister act of Andrea Ariano (age 24) and Tanya Boulanger (age 11) offer a commentary of the same film, in this case, a current film: *Lemony Snicket's: A Series Of Unfortunate Events* (2004). In later editions, the sisters will look both to the past and the future to investigate the ongoing process of cinephilia, shifting tastes, and memory.

Lemony Snicket's: A Series Of Unfortunate Events is Exactly That by Andrea Ariano

Lemony Snicket's: A Series Of Unfortunate Events (2005, Brad Silberling), a film encompassing the first three books of the *Snicket* Series, is the latest in a series of children's literature adaptations à la *Harry Potter*. Even though J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* books are not quite my cup of tea, Daniel Handler (a.k.a. Lemony Snicket, a.k.a. Jude Law) spins a tale of three orphaned children with a realistically dark tone that appeals to my cynical worldview. Needless to say, I am not a cotton-candy-children's-film kind of person. I prefer hard-candy tales by the likes of Tim Burton who creates outcast characters and extraordinarily dark worlds, to which his upcoming remake of *Charlie And The Chocolate Factory* (2005) will almost certainly attest. In his best work, Burton's surreal characters achieve a sensibility and an emotionalism that is quite unique and touching. Brad Silberling's film manages to deliver all the fantastic design of a Tim Burton project; unfortunately, this is accomplished in a rather empty, paint-by-numbers context.

The plot is very simplistic, resembling a series of Scooby Doo-esque episodes in which the recently orphaned Baudelaire children must escape and unmask their cruel uncle, Count Olaf (Jim Carrey), an unsuccessful theater actor who takes the children in for the sole purpose of murdering them and pilfering their large inheritance. Olaf soon fails in this endeavor, subsequently losing custody of the children and forcing him to "act" his way back into their lives as they go from one eccentric guardian (a snake-collecting uncle played by Billy Connolly) to the other (an agoraphobic aunt played by Meryl Streep).

The ensemble's acting kept me interested throughout the often mundane plot. The Baudelaire children perfectly exhibit the talents that help them outsmart Count Olaf's egocentric and overstated acting skills (yes, I am speaking of Count Olaf, although Olaf and Jim Carrey are practically interchangeable in this regard). This is a film to see only if viewers are able to enjoy Carrey's extremely expressive acting, which I believe fits this character quite perfectly since it helps animate a solemn story. As for the children, Emily Browning, Liam Aiken, and Kara Hoffman hold their own as the innovative one, the bookworm, and the toddler with a biting habit, respectively. Bill Connolly and Meryl Streep offer their own distinctive versions of eccentricity, creating a noticeable contrast to the brainy sadness of the older children's acting. Although she does not speak a word throughout the film, Little Kara Hoffman is the film's scene-stealer as her facial expressions match every word of her humorously subtitled toddler gibberish.

The series-of-unfortunate-events is book-ended by two animated credit sequences that are worth mentioning. The opening credit sequence is a computer animated mock-teaser that lays the happiness and sunshine on very thick by introducing the story of a happy elf with a rainbow of pastel colors, birds chirping, and children singing... Until, Lemony Snicket interrupts to explain that the story we are about to see is not a happy one. Just as the actual film is to begin, Snicket adds that it is not too late to go into the next cinema to see a "happy film". This is perhaps the most self-reflexive gesture that I have ever seen in a children's film. Yet, I believe it says more about how the *Lemony Snicket* franchise operates than it does about the film itself. In book form, *Lemony Snicket* constantly plays with a pessimistic, if not fatalistic, tone that calls much attention to itself. Witness the opening paragraph at lemonysnicket.com: "If I were you, I would immediately turn your computer off rather than view any of the dreadful images, read any of the wretched information, play any of the unnerving games or examine the unpleasant books presented within this website". Warnings such as these mimic the book's narration verbatim. It is not surprising then, that the end credits are peppered with beautiful black-and-white cutouts of the Baudelaire children, running from their mean Uncle Olaf. These flat black-and-white characters resemble the bleak illustrations found in the series of books as they provide a perfectly stark contrast to the bubbly three-dimensional animation of the opening credits.

However coy in its treatment of fairy tale cruelty, Silberling's *Lemony Snicket's: A Series Of Unfortunate Events* is a film too traumatizing for small children despite the cutaways to Snicket's voiceover when the violence becomes too intense for young minds. Adult minds may be aggravated by the film as well, especially if they have an aversion to Jim Carrey. For those who like him, it's probably worth noting that this particular role necessitates the portrayal of multiple characters in fairly interesting ways, though hardly in such a manner as to allow the level of satirical irony to be seen in Peter Sellers' performance(s) in Kubrick's subversive *Dr. Strangelove* (1964).

Though *A Series Of Unfortunate Events* is a children's tale, it presents a pessimistic view of the world that might only be appreciated by its adult viewers. Unfortunately, the repetitive plot tends to take away from its beautifully stylized and dreary world. As a Tim Burton enthusiast I am anxious to see whether this summer's *Charlie And The Chocolate Factory* will strike a better balance between cynicism and adult/child spectatorship.

Lemony Snicket's: A Series Of Unfortunate Events is a Must See! by Tanya Boulanger

Lemony Snicket's: A Series Of Unfortunate Events (2004, Brad Silberling) is a movie that if you prefer ones like *13 Going On 30* and *Austin Powers* I don't think that you will like this movie. I don't have any preferences and that is why I liked this movie very much. It was very well written and the characters resembled very much to the ones in the book, especially Count Olaf (Jim Carey). I thought that there wouldn't have been any comedy (even if Jim Carey was in it) because it was a sad movie but it actually had a lot. Unless that is just me and my sister's bad sense of humor. Its really good but it doesn't really follow the book and it has some more parts like why the houses burnt on fire. I also think that you should read the books (in order...duh) and then see the movie because then it would make more sense to you. And if you like to stay and see the end credits its really worth it because they are amazing! I wish that I could tell you that it has a great screenplay or something like that but I can't because I don't know what that is (what? I'm only a kid). Anyways, this is just to say that I really really liked this movie and that I think that you should see this movie (kids, adults, teens and all the other kinds of ages) especially with family.