

Hugo Rifkind on TV

It's weird, mad and pointless, but all the more real because of it



The Grand Tour

(Amazon)

The Crown

(Netflix)

Clarkson, Hammond and May matter because it is godawful being a man. This is the point. This is what they add, so vitally, to the Great National Chatter About Everything. Often, and particularly after the Brexit vote, their former berth of *Top Gear* has been hailed as a window into Normal Britain, so refreshingly different from the Smashed Avocado Limp-Wristed Britain inhabited by the likes of me.

Patently, that's absurd. Normal? The presenters of *The Grand Tour* are not normal. They're three florid multimillionaires in wallpaper shirts who only leave the Cotswolds for work and wouldn't recognise a flat-roofed pub if they woke up drunk on top of it. And yes, they are anti-PC, instinctively sexist and inclined to laugh at people for things like "being French", but none of that is ever the point. They don't talk like this because they mean it. They talk like this because the alternatives are terrifying. They talk like this because life and existence is a gaping void of nothingness and we are all cold and lonely and going to die. All male conversation — cars, football, politics, woodwork, the merits of the M6 Toll, how you work a tank — is basically the same conversation. It is white noise. It blots out the fear.

Were there ever a silence between Clarkson, Hammond and May something awful could happen. Perhaps they would weep. Perhaps they would kiss. So as not to find out, they talk rubbish about cars, and when they run out of rubbish to talk about cars they talk rubbish about other things, such as not liking the noise that polystyrene makes, or the time they saw a man's unwiped bottom. And, should they ever have to spend a moment alone, then for preference they will spend it in a really noisy car, making "VROOOOM" noises. Which may, in this first episode of the new season, be where Richard Hammond comes a cropper, because he has an electric car that makes no noise at all, and perhaps because of that he nearly dies. Although we'll come to that in a moment.

They've won, these three. Axed from the BBC after Jeremy Clarkson punched a producer, they could have faded away into streaming irrelevancy. Instead the BBC's replacement *Top Gear* has been mad and precarious, and the old firm have gone on to do much the same thing, but for far, far



MEN AND MOTORS James May, Jeremy Clarkson and Richard Hammond. Below: Claire Foy in *The Crown*

more money, and in a manner now laden with the wild insouciance of not really caring about any of it. Too rich now to even have to leave the Cotswolds unless they particularly want to, they now host the show from a marquee in a field from which they claim, probably spuriously, they can actually see their various nearby houses. Clarkson is a little gaunt, following a recent bout of pneumonia. Brian May has had a haircut and... hang on, no, Brian May is somebody else. Unless he really has had a haircut? No, James May. He's almost unrecognisable now, anyway, without that midlife crisis on his head. I'm not wholly confident that it's the same person. Hammond looks increasingly like Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen, or a musketeer. For the pre-recorded bits of episode one of season two, which dropped yesterday, they all took supercars on a tour of Switzerland.

Don't make me tell you which cars. If you want to know which cars, read the car section. Do we even have a car section? Whatever. Clarkson has a Lamborghini, May a Honda hybrid and Hammond a Croatian electric car, which Clarkson sneeringly dubs "a lady shaver", because electricity is of course contemptible and so are women. Then they drive them around Switzerland. That's it, really. They stay in a

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health hotel, which their pretend-natural *Made In Chelsea*-style script claims was chosen by May. Here Clarkson gets hammy cross about the available dinner, but nobody makes a joke about him punching that producer. Come on guys. Try harder. During the days they repeatedly visit Lucerne, which is amusing because the streets are really narrow and Clarkson's Lamborghini really isn't. Then it emerges that Hammond keeps dragging them back to this town because it's the only place for miles he can charge up his car. Ha! Plugs! Gay! Etc.

It's after this, anyway, that Hammond drives his electric car off a hillside, whereupon it rolls down a verge and blows up. Possibly you've read about this? The footage is dramatic, full of flames and screams and shocked bystanders. Swiss mountain rescue helicopters fly in, medivac stretchers criss-cross the screen and the blackened corpse of the car smokes at the bottom. Things are solemn, tragic, awful, like the end of *Blackadder*. Then cut back to the studio, where they simply... don't mention what has just happened at all.

This is good banter. You might even call it structural banter. Sure, one of them has nearly died. Sure, a car which cost £2 million has just turned into ash. Wikipedia tells me that the Croatians made eight of them, and there are only seven now. Do you deal with that by feeling cold and sombre, thinking of the waste, and vowing to change your ways? Do you hell. They were the same about Clarkson's pneumonia, which nearly killed him. Probably they'll always be like this. "Clarkson, you dead git!" the last of them will wheeze,

from his rocking chair by the fire. "You stiff! You corpse! Lying in that box you've got less acceleration than a 1989 Fiat Punto! Heh-heh!" Holding sadness and despair and terror at bay through the sheer power of inconsequentially taking the piss. Real men. Weird, mad and pointless, but all the more real because of it. Bantering, perennially, into the void.

Reviewing the last series of *The Crown* when it came out a year ago, my lasting impression was one of reverence. You could imagine actual royals watching, I thought, even if they were in it, and not really minding their portrayal too much. And how, I wondered, would the creators manage to maintain that tone of respect once we got out of the age of deference and into that of toe-sucking and wanting to be a tampon?

Season two answers that question, by making it pretty clear that they won't bother. There are various big themes running through the new ten episodes (all released by Netflix yesterday), mainly to do with British decline and the waning status of the monarchy that goes along with it. In character terms, however, the big development is the portrayal of the Duke of Edinburgh as basically Austin Powers. From sneaking off into bushes with winsome Polynesian islanders to a state dinner where Ma'am doesn't trust him not to sneak off to one of Buckingham Palace's 700 spare rooms with Jackie Kennedy, there is an awful lot going on here to prevent Matt Smith getting a knighthood. The script even implies an involvement in the Profumo affair that goes way beyond any ever reported. Lord knows what they'll show us when they get to Lady Di.

It remains, though, quite brilliant. Starting with Suez and going on to Profumo, the ground here is less well-covered than that of series one, and the whole thing is far more interesting as a result. One episode in the middle covers Lord Altrincham's ridicule of the Queen in the late Fifties, about which I knew almost nothing, when he sparked a constitutional crisis by doing not much more than writing, in a little-read magazine, that she wasn't super at public speaking. How stilted we used to be, and so recently. I wonder how I'd have earned a living?

The Crown is unafraid of big messages. Here, aside from the above, we have pre-echoes of the Queen's difficulties with the Prince of Wales. "She's cold with him," says Princess Margaret, before remarking how strange it must be to have "a child that represents your own death". When Her Majesty discusses Anthony Eden's impatience to replace Winston Churchill, forced to wait until he himself was past his prime, you can feel the conflicts of the future looming into view like a monstrous carbuncle.

Ma'am regenerates as Olivia Colman for series three, which is shame because, brilliant as Colman is, Claire Foy has put in the performance of a lifetime, again. Either way, while ardent monarchists might bristle at the way this is going, for the rest of us it's getting better and better.