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A flood of Oscar winners and hopefuls come flooding into BluRay, DVD, VOD and other venues. Let's get started!

**12 YEARS A SLAVE** (\$39.99 BluRay combo; Fox)

**GRAVITY** (\$35.99 BluRay combo; Warner Bros.)

**NEBRASKA** (\$39.99 BluRay combo; Paramount)

**BLUE IS THE WARMEST COLOR** (\$24.95 BluRay; Criterion) -- I cannot join the praise for 12 Years A Slave, though at the very least I'm glad the film's release prompted me to read the classic slave narrative by Solomon Northrup. Despite flaws of its own (mainly, the need to stick to the classic tropes of such works, including a kindly master to contrast to the slave master and the rescue by a Canadian), it's a compelling work with such accuracy in its broad outlines that historians were able to track down some of the locations described in the book and confirm its essential truth. The film was directed by Steve McQueen and like David O. Russell, his career seems to be becoming more successful and less interesting. Hunger was a bold, bracing debut. Shame was a less successful but still idiosyncratic follow-up while 12 Years A Slave seems devoid of any directorial personality. It signally fails to convey the passage of time: it feels more like 12 Weeks A Slave. That's no small point since the oppressiveness and bleakness of Northrup's situation is obviously compounded by its length. But the actors are committed and two scenes struck home with me. One is the slave auction overseen in a home by Paul Giamatti, an experience chilling in its indifference to the humans being sold. The other is the scene where the reserved, keeps-to-himself Northrup finds himself drawn into the singing of a spiritual. Intellectually, we know that spirituals were important as a form of release, a chance for these captive people to express their anguish and sorrow and determination to survive in a way that would not bring down punishment. But rarely has that come across so movingly as it does here. Needless to say, it's a landmark work on many levels (both commercially and in terms of winning Best Picture) that will long outlast my indifference to it as a work of art.

Gravity is inevitably paired with two other movies about lone survivors (though not, oddly enough, Lone Survivor) -- those are Captain Phillips and All Is Lost. Gravity is my least favorite but it's still a fun popcorn ride for one viewing. Sandra Bullock is an astronaut who finds herself facing incredible odds when disaster strikes and she must use every ounce of will-power and smarts to survive and try to get back down to Earth again. It's a technical achievement, to be sure, but to everyone wowed by the feeling that they were really in space, I say go watch 2001: A Space Odyssey. That film is just as convincing and stunning to behold and you don't need to don 3-D glasses. (I did not preview the 3-D version for the home.) That leaves the story -- as it should. The best special effects in the world won't save a crappy story and crappy special effects can't hold back a good one. Audiences clearly gobbled up this one, though the twists were modest and, to me, the final shot so overdone I couldn't help giggling. It's fun, but I doubt you'd want to watch it more than once or twice at most. Once the ride is over, a second go-round just emphasizes the flatness of what's been accomplished.

I don't care how many times he says differently, director Alexander Payne has a real disdain for the heartland and the people who live in it. That comes across most strongly in Nebraska, his latest film. A road trip movie in which son Will Forte takes his father Bruce Dern on a journey to secure his winning prize money. In truth, Dern

is suffering from dementia and can't distinguish between reality and fantasy; Forte is indulging him and maybe taking an opportunity to spend time with his dad before that opportunity is gone for good. It's the mockery of relatives and neighbors that makes the film unpleasant. Awkward and ugly women squawking out off-key at karaoke, lumpen relatives who seem almost mentally challenged and stare numbly at the television -- it's all so obvious and so mean-spirited. Dern is very good as the wavering father and June Squibb is fun as his wife, though she relishes too much some of her character's outrageous behavior to let us be shocked as well. Forte however is hopeless as the son, deeply challenged as an actor and unable to hold up his end of what is essentially a two-hander for much of the film. His fundamental inability to act or emote with any conviction (he spends the film frozen, desperately hoping that underplaying everything will somehow register as real) torpedoed what might have been a modest success.

It used to be a spectacle like Gravity had to be seen in a theater to be appreciated. And certainly most people felt the same way, given its tremendous success. But thanks to large screen TVs and great sound systems, in fact spectacles like Gravity also play really well in the home. In fact, it may be quiet demanding fare like Blue Is The Warmest Color that need to be seen in a theater for the first time. This three hour French film about first love blooming between two teenage girls was a major success in Europe, but here in the US it came and went without much fanfare, despite some great reviews. Surely cineastes will want to check it out. But being trapped in a movie theater with an audience focused and committed to a drama like this is a powerful thing. At home you're tempted to pause and chat and go to the bathroom and answer the phone and a million other things. A joyride like Gravity can handle the noise. A quiet drama like this with two very talented actresses holding the screen might actually be better at the movies. So when you put it on, try not to let the world distract you. By the way, this edition is no-frills and Criterion plays to release a special edition later in the year.

**LES PETITS MEURTRES D'AGATHA CHRISTIE SET 1** (\$59.99 DVD; Acorn)

**L.A. LAW SEASON ONE** (\$29.93 DVD; Shout Factory)

**DOCTOR WHO: THE TIME OF THE DOCTOR** (\$19.98 BluRay; BBC Home Entertainment)

**THE MIDDLE FOURTH SEASON** (\$44.98 DVD; Warner Bros.)

**RAWHIDE SEASON SEVEN VOLUMES ONE & TWO** (\$46.99 each on DVD; CBS/Paramount)

**THE VENTURE BROS. SEASON FIVE** (\$31.97 BluRay; Turner Home Entertainment)

**ABOVE SUSPICION SET 3** (\$29.99 DVD; Acorn) -- What a delightful surprise! French television has taken some classic Agatha Christie mysteries and created a new duo (Superintendent Larosiere, a lady's man and his sidekick Inspector Lampion, who prefers the men) to investigate. Set in the 1930s, you get the allure of France, a duo rather than Christie's usual solo acts (Poirot and Marple) and somehow it freshens up the tales very nicely indeed. I didn't even know I wanted French adaptations of Christie solved by a made-up duo but now I want more. Les Petits Meurtres A definite must for fans of Christie. (The last of seven mysteries features a new team in the 1950s; it's fine, but I hope the main duo returns with more adventures.)

Nothing could help but suffer compared to the landmark series Hill Street Blues. But L.A. Law took over the Thursday at 10 pm slot on NBC and ran with it: huge ratings (better than Hill Street usually got), tons of critical acclaim and an excellent cast that shot to stardom (or reclaimed it). Nonetheless, even at the time, I felt the glossy jumps from high drama to low comedy and the general hijinks of this high-powered firm were a bit much and time has not been kind to it. What once seemed bold now just seems silly. What once pretended to drama is now clearly soap. By the time of the Venus Butterfly and people falling down elevator shafts, I was looking elsewhere. Still, it's a good cast led by many who would never have better roles, including Michael Tucker, Jill Eikenberry, Harry Hamlin, Jimmy Smits, Susan Dey and Corbin Bernsen. Dated, very dated, but still fun for those wanting nostalgia. The rest will see this as not close to today's standards. Finally, it's great to have it coming out, but eight seasons dribbling out one by one feels wrong. Anyone wanting to own the first season would probably want the entire season. The season by season release of TV shows from 28 years ago feels expensive and pointless.

Okay, let's just all agree that the real finale for the Eleventh Doctor Matt Smith was the terrific special *The Day Of The Doctor* that aired all over the world (and presumably in other dimensions and verses) at the same time in November. The holiday special *The Time Of The Doctor* is a tepid denouement. Christmas often brings out the best in the Doctor (and the writers) but they clearly shot their creative ammo with the gripping *Day Of The Doctor*. Here's there's a planet in danger, a Christmas dinner issue that's never really tied in or resolved nicely and Smith running around trying to gin up enthusiasm for a very sub-par storyline. Ah well. Fans will appreciate the many extras, including a "Farewell To Matt Smith" narrated by Alex Kingston, who made a great River Song and would have been an even greater Doctor.

*The Middle* keeps trucking along, delivering solid family entertainment with a strong cast, much like star Patricia Heaton's *Everybody Loves Raymond* did for many years. This show isn't quite in that league, but it's good and that's certainly better than most. You get the usual travails of a family, with kids facing college, driving exams and the perils of the lunch room with the well-intended advice of parents who are loving, but have problems of their own. Heaton and Neil Flynn are very good as the folks. Charlie McDermott and Eden Sher are excellent as the teenage kids, with only Atticus Shaffer descending into sitcom-y territory with his unrealistic and weirdo youngest kid Brick. Dial back his nuttiness, writers and let this show's realism remain its strong suit.

*Rawhide* is of course the western that launched the career of Clint Eastwood. In the eighth and final season, he would become the boss of the cattle drive. But here he's still learning from trail boss Gil (Eric Fleming). It's a good show with some very strong episodes that would be ideal for highlighting in a greatest hits set that would surely reach a lot more people than the entire series season by season. Certainly the price here for half a season of a TV show that aired 50 years ago is just plain nutty. It's great to have entire series available for those that want it. But especially for shows without season long arcs, many dramas (and virtually all comedies) would do better to promote a well-chosen highlights set, say the 12 best episodes with lots of extras. Why not really exploit these libraries rather than just dutifully put out seasons for the faithful?

Everyone probably made jokes about the homoerotic and just plain silly nature of *Jonny Quest* back in the day. But to turn that one-joke idea into a TV series -- and a clever one at that -- is surely unexpected. But that's exactly what *The Venture Bros.* has done. Season five had the fewest number of episodes yet (eight, plus two specials, all included here) but at least season six is on the way this summer. It's a goofy show, with Sergeant Hatred as the bodyguard who's awfully fond of his charges and super villain The Monarch inspiring all sorts of butterfly jokes. Don't be fooled by the first season; they were just getting their legs. And dig the cover art! That deserves to be a wall poster all on its own.

Helen Mirren has so many accomplishments that she's not over-shadowed by her triumphant work on *Prime Suspect*. But that show's creator Lynda La Plante surely is. There are worse problems than creating a classic TV series. But sometimes it does get in the way of people seeing your other work. That's certainly the case in the US with her series *Above Suspicion*. It's not a patch on *Prime Suspect*, but is solid and entertaining and well acted, with Kelly Reilly and Ciarin Hinds especially welcome in this final mystery where they're delving into the death of an actress. Good stuff.

**THE HUNGER GAMES: CATCHING FIRE** (\$39.99 BluRay combo; Lionsgate)

**THOR: THE DARK WORLD** (\$39.99 3-D BluRay combo; Disney)

**FREE FALL** (\$24.95 DVD; Wolfe)

**PEOPLE OF A FEATHER** (\$27.95 DVD; First Run Features)

**MUSCLE SHOALS** (\$29.98 DVD; Magnolia) -- The second film in the *Hunger Games* tetralogy received some weird complaints from fans. It was so slow, they said; it took forever to get to the action. They were right but it just seemed weird to me that anyone would complain. The *Hunger Games* seemed like the *Twilight* movies to me, though with better reviews. To me, the first film was very faithful to the fun books by Suzanne Collins, much to its detriment. It had some very silly costumes, nutty hairdos to indicate the decadent future and cheap special

effects (especially the embarrassing "Girl On Fire" effect). But everyone ate it up. The second film seemed, to me, exactly like the first with all the attendant strengths and weaknesses. But somehow this time fans weren't as thrilled. Blame Collins: the second book has a lot of politics and infighting before the slaughter begins. Personally, I wish the final two parts were six months apart rather than a year, but what do I know? It's making money hand over fist. And enough with the Peeta haters. He's a hero and a fighter, sacrificing everything for his love and his country. Gale just wants to run away! (Take that, Liam Hemsworth.) Unlike the Twilight films (which got so bad I stopped going), I'll keep watching these.

I'll also keep watching Thor, though I assume Liam's brother Chris won't be back on screen as the Marvel hero until The Avengers. Thor really is an impossible role that works best in small doses (which is why he was so much more fun as part of a team than on his own). It also didn't help having Thor wandering around Earth the way he did, with all sorts of jokey humor. Thor: The Dark World works better because it's set more on Asgard where he's not a walking, talking punchline to every scene. It's by no means a good movie, but it's certainly more watchable than the first. Fans will be pleased.

Free Fall is Germany's Brokeback Mountain. Well, that tells you pretty much everything you need to know about this drama about a cop who finds a running partner for his morning workout and then eventually realizes there are other, better ways to burn calories. Hanno Koffler of Summer Storm proves he's not a one-hot wonder. This well-reviewed drama is not, I think, the cultural landmark that Brokeback was but it is a solid showcase for Koffler and Max Reimelt of Before The Fall.

People of a Feather shows the Inuits fighting to adapt and survive amidst a changing Arctic, as embodied by the eider duck and their warm feathers. Like so many films made in the harsh north, it's sobering to see global warming's effect, inspiring to see how beautiful this untrammelled parts of the world can be and a lot more fun to see it on DVD than go there yourself. Fiji, yes, but the Arctic? I prefer to explore it on film.

20 Feet From Stardom got all the love this Oscar season. But fans of music will also want to check out Muscle Shoals, a look at one of the legendary studios of pop music, located in Alabama and the well-spring for more classic music than you can imagine. Mick Jagger, Etta James, Gregg Allman, Alicia Keys, Percy Sledge and many others weigh in on one of the keystones of rock and soul.

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**Note:** Michael Giltz is provided with free copies of DVDs and Blu-rays with the understanding that he would be considering them for review. Generally, he does not guarantee to review and he receives far more titles than he can cover.