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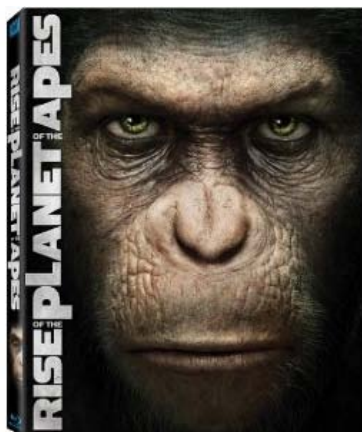
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Okay, the year is galloping to a close. Here's a rundown of LOTS of titles from the past three weeks. Keep scrolling!



RISE OF THE PLANET OF THE APES (\$39.99 BluRay Combo or \$29.98; FOX) -- I did NOT spend the entire movie thinking, "What great special effects! Man, the apes mix in with the humans so convincingly!" Nope. Instead I was caught up in the character of Caesar (Andy Serkis), the result of human experiment who is raised with love but realizes he and his people are in fact in chains. Subtle, funny, scary -- Serkis is marvelous and well deserves a nomination for the Academy Award. (The scene

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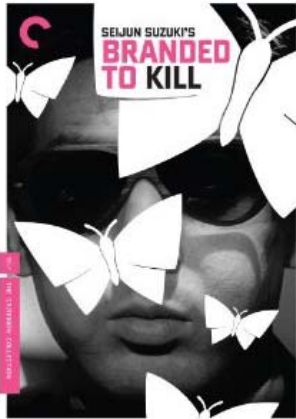
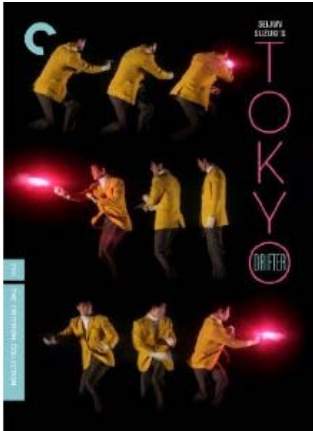
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where Caesar helps John Lithgow's character with his utensil was one of the most moving moments of the year. The scene where he says "No!?" it still startled and astonished.) The supporting actor category will probably come down to Christopher Plummer versus Albert Brooks but I'm rooting for Serkis to make the short list. That will be a huge victory in itself. The movie has silly moments (mainly including James Franco's gal pal Freida Pinto, the least observant girlfriend and scientist in history). But it's probably the best popcorn movie of the year.



TOKYO DRIFTER (\$29.95 DVD or \$39.95 BluRay; Criterion)

BRANDED TO KILL (\$29.95 DVD or \$39.95 BluRay; Criterion) -- Don't get me wrong: any good movie is entertaining. But let's be honest. Sometimes Important Films can be awfully...important. This one-two punch from Japanese director Seijun Suzuki is important and fun. Tokyo Drifter is a nutty, colorful, super-cool mash-up of Sergio Leone set pieces and James Bond cool features gunman Tetsu trying to go straight and maintain the code of honor, all while his suffering songbird of a girlfriend sings the song "Tokyo Drifter" almost as much as he does. Gorgeous and absurd sets, striking cinematography, beautiful actors and a plot that makes almost no sense turn this gangster tale into a surreal, hilarious treat. Branded To Kill is in black and white but somehow ups the ante visually while telling the story of an assassin (the iconic Joe Shishido) who loves, loves, loves steamed rice. These two movies were so deliberately nonsensical the director was fired by his studio. If you like Quentin Tarantino, dive right in.



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THE HELP (\$39.99 BluRay and \$29.99 DVD; Touchstone/Dreamworks)

THE HANGOVER PART II (\$35.99 BluRay and \$28.98 DVD; Warner Bros.)

THE SMURFS (\$40.99 BluRay and \$30.99 DVD; Columbia)

COWBOYS & ALIENS (\$34.98 BluRay and \$29.98 DVD; Universal)

FRIGHT NIGHT 3D (\$49.99 BluRay combo w 3-D and \$29.99 DVD; Dreamworks/Touchstone) -- Five



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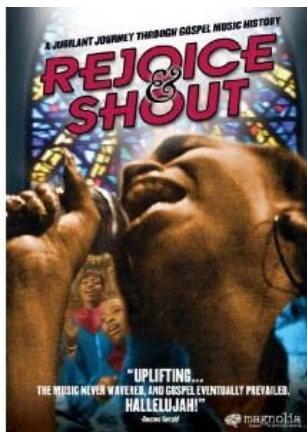
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big Hollywood movies; five duds. *The Help* is a big blockbuster hit that began as a small indie film with a tiny budget and big talent in front of the camera. If it moves you and makes you feel good about how far we've come with racism (as depicted in the movies), well bless your heart. I found it embarrassing and no I didn't think the acting rescued it one bit. *The Hangover Part II* was more of the same only much less so. I'm glad NPH has a hit franchise; I just wish it were something better than *The Smurfs*. Kudos to *Cowboys & Aliens* for tackling a quirky comic book. Unfortunately it wasn't just the ad campaign that didn't deliver. The movie is no fun as sci-fi or a western. Finally, *Fright Night* is an unnecessary remake of an okay horror flick done in unnecessary 3-D.

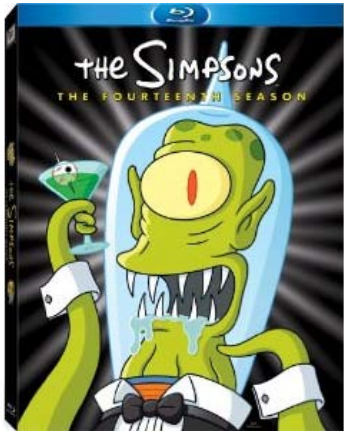


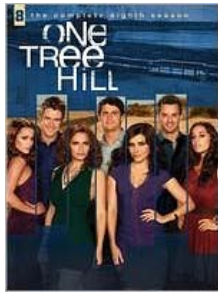
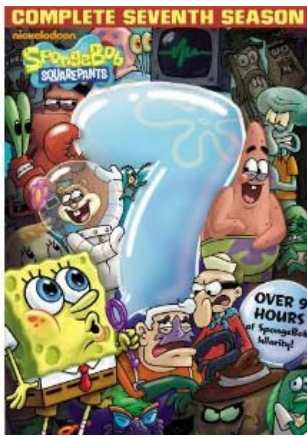
THE BLACK POWER MIXTAPE 1967-1975 (\$24.98; Sundance Selects)

REJOICE & SHOUT (\$26.98; Magnolia) -- Forget *The Help*. If you want to see two films about the black experience in America, watch these two fine documentaries. *The Black Power Mixtape 1967-1975* is an involving story of the Black Power Movement as chronicled by the whitest of possible institutions: Swedish television. Documentary filmmakers somehow got the money to come to the US and interview everyone in sight. Authorities were so bemused by them, the Swedes got tremendous access that includes a jailhouse interview with Angela Davis. Her aria here in response to one question is so impassioned and political and righteous and fierce you'll learn more in those five minutes than a dozen books. The audience I saw it with burst into applause at the end. *Rejoice & Shout* is about gospel music. It's not terribly distinguished in the mild interviews and straightforward concert footage and tracking of gospel's history. But the movie shines in digging up countless archival performances that will rouse your spirit no matter what your faith (or lack of it). Whoever unearthed these gems deserves an award.



BIG LOVE: THE COMPLETE COLLECTION (\$199.95; HBO) -- It's strange to watch a TV show stretched out over years, thinking you know how good a story is even before you've read the ending. More and more, I find the only way I can truly judge a show is to watch it all at once in a compact viewing over a few days or weeks. So HBO's polygamy drama Big Love has come out in a complete series boxed set and now we can start to get a handle on what we've got here, the highs and the lows, the misdirections, the confused plotlines that sometimes petered out and sometimes paid off. Obviously it has a great cast from Bill Paxton (in the role of a lifetime) to his three wives (Chloe Sevigny, Jeanne Tripplehorn and Ginnifer Goodwin) to his nine children (only nine? slacker!). It's all overseen by Paxton's father-in-law from hell Harry Dean Stanton. Unlike many series, Big Love feels like it has a genuine beginning, middle and end so this DVD set (filled with extras) is the ideal way to see it. Acclaimed but somehow overshadowed at the same time, maybe now Big Love will get its due.





THE SIMPSONS FOURTEENTH SEASON (\$59.99 BluRay; FOX)

FUTURAMA VOLUME 6 (\$39.99 BluRay; FOX)

PORTLANDIA SEASON ONE (\$26.95 BluRay; IFC/VSC)

SPONGEBOB SQUAREPANTS SEVENTH SEASON (\$26.98; Paramount)

UNDERBELLY THE TRILOGY (\$99.98; EOne)

ONE TREE HILL EIGHTH SEASON (\$59.98; Warner Bros.) -- Will fans of *The Simpsons* and *Futurama* ever stop fighting? Unlike fans of, say, *Family Guy* vs. *Simpsons* (people who hate each other so much they can sort of respect their differences), fans of *Futurama* and *Simpsons* both love Matt Groening and probably love entire seasons of each other's shows. But they can argue endlessly over which is better and when and really hate each other because they're practically family. In comparing vintage *Simpsons* to versus new *Rama*, I'd give this round to...*Simpsons*. *Portlandia* is a sketch comedy show set in Portland, Oregon and it's as daft as that sounds. If you want to join a cult, watch this show.

SpongeBob remains eternally amusing and defiantly upbeat; I much prefer to get this series by season than those endless repackaging of episodes. *Underbelly* is new to me, but it's an acclaimed Aussie drama invariably referred to as their *Sopranos*. But it received genuine praise and was a strong commercial hit. The show sprang from the most famous crime waves in Aussie history and was so topical trials were still going on for the criminals depicted -- TV had to be blacked out in some parts of the country to avoid influencing jurors. Finally, Chad Michael Murray is lone gone but OTH still won't die. It's the zombie of TV soaps!

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Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free copies of DVDs and BluRays 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.

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