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DVDs: Craig Ferguson... Genius?

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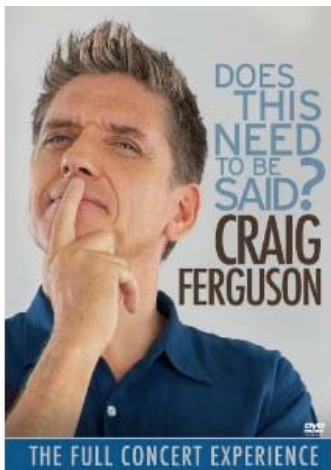
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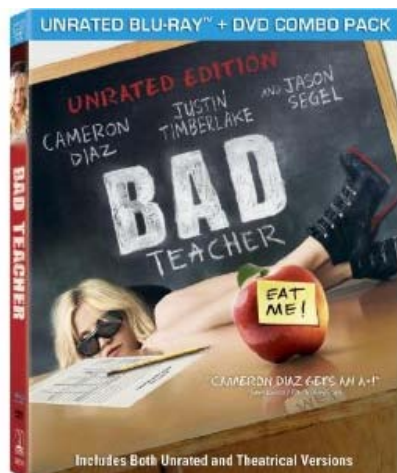
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CRAIG FERGUSON: DOES THIS NEED TO BE SAID (\$16.99; Comedy Central/Paramount) -- I've

made it clear before that I think Craig Ferguson is the cat's meow. (See ["Who's the King of Late Nite? Craig Ferguson!"](#)) In fact, a gift from a good friend last year was a trip to Nashville to see Ferguson record this very stand-up act. We had a great time, though you won't see Ferguson at his best here. This is fairly standard material here, though Ferguson is such a genial figure, he wins you over. Eddie Izzard he isn't, when it comes to stand-up, but hardcore fans like me will want to see it. The rest of you should start watching or DVRing his show. Check my earlier piece for a rundown of what makes him so special. What astonishes me now (and bums me out) is his skeleton robot sidekick. I hated the sidekick idea because I wanted to be his chubby white male sidekick. Then when the robot appeared he was stiff and awkward. It just didn't work. But they kept fiddling and fiddling and slowly hit gold. Suddenly Geoff Peterson was a classic sidekick -- gay, sometimes drunk, and bitter; he and Ferguson play off each other wonderfully in banter that is presumably scripted but comes across as loose and off the cuff. They make inventive use of Geoff's many voices (cheesy ad voiceover guy, mawkish Vegas-y showman, Morgan Freeman, etc.) and most importantly Geoff is very very funny. He's also a scathing satire of sidekicks. It's hard to imagine anyone else ever wanting to be a sidekick again after Geoff. But then, I might have thought the same thing after Jeffrey Tambor's Hank from *The Larry Sanders Show*.



BAD TEACHER (\$40.99 BluRay combo or \$30.99 DVD; Sony) -- Like *Bridesmaids*, this was an inexplicably successful comedy and yet I'm happy for all involved. Jason Segal has been a favorite since *F&G* (good luke with *The Muppets*, dude!), Justin Timberlake continues to grow as an actor and Cameron Diaz can be very funny and needed a hit. So did director Jake Kasdan, who has quirkier and better instincts. Unfortunately, it doesn't live up to the pretty good trailer. Oh well.



THE GUNS OF NAVARONE (\$19.99; Sony) -- Director J. Lee Thompson made almost 50 films and had two very good years. In 1962, he made *Cape Fear* with Gregory Peck and Robert Mitchum. One year earlier he stepped into the troubled production of *The Guns of Navarone*, righted the ship and turned out a big hit. (Peck dubbed him Mighty Mouse on that set.) The film is firmly in the tradition of quests. An oddball, ragtag team is brought together to achieve an impossible quest: go behind enemy lines and blow up key, long-range Nazi guns. It's a little lumbering, a little stodgy, a little obvious but boy it's fun. Peck, David Niven and Anthony Quinn lead the cast.

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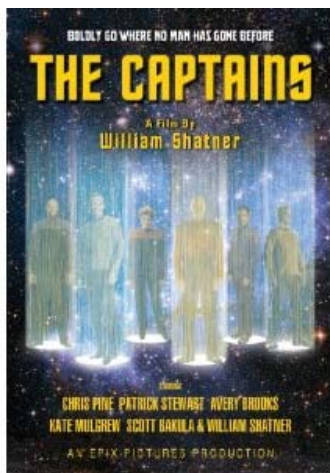
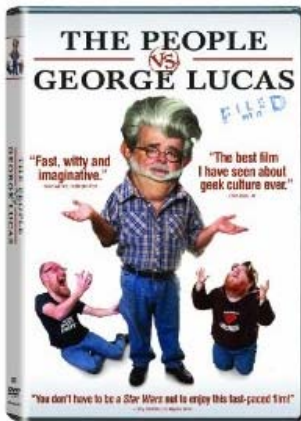
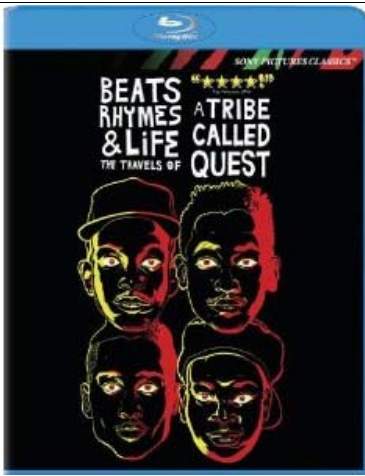
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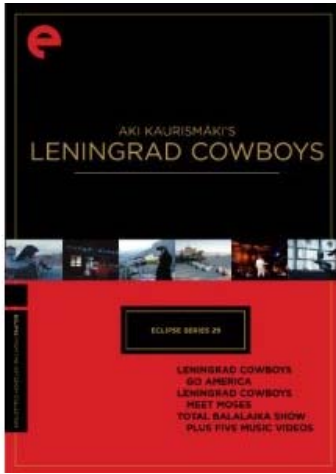
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BEATS RHYMES & LIFE: THE TRAVELS OF A TRIBE CALLED QUEST (\$35.99 BluRay or \$30.99 DVD; Sony Pictures Classics)

PAGE ONE: INSIDE THE NEW YORK TIMES (\$29.98 BluRay or \$26.98 DVD; Magnolia)

THE PEOPLE VS GEORGE LUCAS (\$27.98; Lionsgate)

THE CAPTAINS (\$19.98; EOne) -- Here are four documentaries, none of them interesting as films. Their appeal rests solely on the subject and how much you might be interested in it. They're listed in descending order of creative success. The Tribe Called Quest film has a magnetic , great band at its heart and a lot of great music. *Page One* has the presumably fail-safe appeal of watching the paper of record cover news for a year and try to adjust to the net. But the talking heads are so static (and sometimes so annoyingly self-important) that it's a shame the filmmakers couldn't make more of their unprecedented access. *People Vs. George Lucas* benefits from lots of clips of fan-created spoofs, homages and the like. But they have one point to make (Lucas is a schmuck for refusing to preserve and make available the historically important original version of his *Star Wars* films) and repeat it for 93 minutes. It's cathartic but strictly for hardcore fans. Finally, *The Captains* has director William Shatner go around and interview all the other main actors who have played Starfleet captains on TV and in the movies. Shatner is a nicely quirky interviewer but unless you speak Klingon, your interest in this is very limited.



LENINGRAD COWBOYS (\$44.95; Eclipse.Criterion) -- Five years after *Spinal Tap*, Aki Kaurismaki created the hapless band Leningrad Cowboys and in *Leningrad Cowboys Go America* (1989) they toured the US. Shaggy humor, culture clashes and Kaurismaki's deadpan soul worked so goofily well that the fictional band actually toured around the world. This film has been so hard to see that a retrospective of his films at the IFC Center in NYC includes prints for every film included *except* this one, which they could only get on DVD. This Eclipse set includes the original film (beloved by those who have worn out their copy of *Spinal Tap*), the less successful sequel *Leningrad Cowboys Meet Moses* (when their manager becomes born again) and the concert film *Total Balalaika Show* in which Leningrad Cowboys reach an absurdist peak best enjoyed by those who have memorized lines from the original film.



BATMAN YEAR ONE (\$24.98 BluRay or \$19.98 DVD; Warner Bros.) -- Frank Miller brilliantly updated with the storylines that would become *The Dark Knight* and then *Batman: Year One* graphic novels. This direct to DVD animated film is very faithful indeed to Miller's original work. The animation

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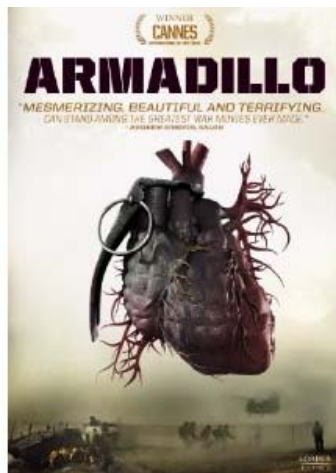


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is respectful of the original's images (the illustrator was David Mazzucchelli) but on a technical level falls far short of what one would expect from a feature film (though it's a lot better than the barely-animated-at-all releases we've seen proliferate). The voice cast is starry but far from perfect. I'm actually a fan of actor Benjamin McKenzie but not all good actors can do good voice work. Either McKennzie doesn't have that skill or he's just poorly cast as Bruce Wayne, because he feels stiff and awkward throughout. Bryan Cranston of *Breaking Bad* is a much better fit as Jim Gordon, which is a good thing since he's virtually the main character (some fans call this *Jim Gordon: Year One*). And of course I and fanboys all love Eliza Dushku. But since Catwoman is black in this series, having Dushku do her voice feels like taking color-blind casting one step too far.



ARMADILLO (\$29.95; Lorber) -- A fine Danish documentary, this follows a group of soldiers on a six-month tour of Afghanistan. The director's statement said the film was about the addiction of war. Clearly, he came in wanting to understand why anyone would choose to go to a war zone, especially people as nominally involved in the politics of the US occupation of Afghanistan as young Danish men. Happily, the film evinces no such agenda. We follow the guys as they're tearfully hugged goodbye and then endure months of boredom. Many scenes are depressingly familiar, with local Afghanis caught between soldiers who show up during the day and the Taliban who show up at night. The men reinforce the idea of soldiering as frat boys with guns: they party, call each other gay, wrestle around, watch a lot of porn and do public service -- in this case serve their country with diligence. It's only late in the film when we witness two firefights and the filmmakers are so clearly in danger that we become frightened for them. The rush of actually facing the enemy (the soldiers are worried they'll go home without being tested in battle) is clearly the key as far as the filmmaker is concerned. Their actions on the field, which may be callous by civilian standards (they boast about their actions, joke about the enemy dead) seem understandable. But in the film one soldier's mother calls in to complain about his description of the events and an investigation is launched that peters out. Now, with the release of the film, a new investigation was launched and the soldiers were cleared of wrongdoing. What's no surprise is that about half the men re-up. I think it's not that momentary rush *à la* *The Hurt Locker* but more the camaraderie and sense of genuine purpose they have. Perhaps most striking is the film's strong visuals under very difficult conditions. The material is too similar to other documentaries to recommend it strongly, but it's a solid work nonetheless.



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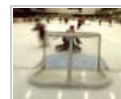
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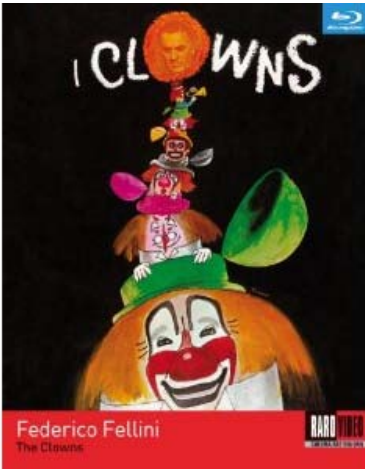


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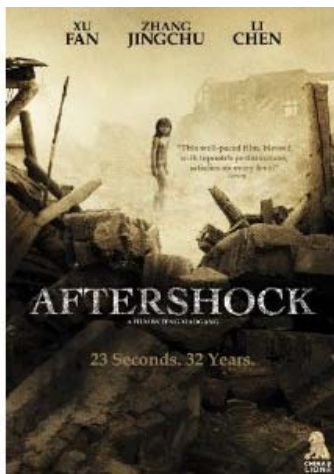
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THE CROW BLURAY (\$19.99; Miramax/Lionsgate)

CAPE FEAR BLURAY (\$19.98; Universal)

THE CLOWNS BLURAY (\$39.98; Rare Video) -- Three catalog titles that fans will snatch up. The first is easily the most important, with Brandon Lee's star-making turn tragically undercut by his death on the set. The BluRay looks pretty great; a darkish and moody film like this benefits greatly. I've always found Martin Scorsese's *Cape Fear* faintly embarrassing for him, though Robert De Niro's scene with Juliette Lewis sucking on his thumb is creepiness of the highest order. Otherwise, it's inferior in every way to the Robert Mitchum original. Finally, *The Clowns* is an oddity -- a sort of fanciful TV documentary about director Federico Fellini and his love of clowns. Strictly for the fanatical, but this BluRay does spruce up the movie compared to the DVD version a bit.



AFTERSHOCK (\$26.95; New Video) -- At first I was intrigued. A Chinese film about earthquakes? Would it take on the corruption that resulted in buildings so shoddy that they simply collapsed like pancakes? No, they would not. A resolutely mainstream, rather tepid drama, it politely uses the devastating 1976 earthquake in Tangshan as a backdrop for a family saga. The aftershocks are the

emotional damages felt by the survivors: in this case, a mother filled with guilt, a son who lost his arm and a daughter who felt abandoned and unloved and was taken in by a foster family that thought she was an orphan. The situation is wrenching but the presentation is so middle of the road and obvious that very little resonates emotionally. This may be a step forward: China can make dull Oscar bait just as competently as the US. Poor direction but boy, some of the crowd scenes are impressive; you sure can get cheap day players to work your film when your country contains one billion people and counting.

Now tell me, what is TV's greatest family drama of all-time? My personal favorite is *I'll Fly Away*, which I still eagerly await on DVD. What about you?

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the co-host of Showbiz Sandbox, a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's available free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his website and his daily blog. Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called Popsurfing and also available for free on iTunes. Link to him on Netflix and gain access to thousands of ratings and reviews.

NOTE: Michael Giltz is provided with free copies of DVDs to consider for review. He typically does not guarantee coverage and invariably receives far more screeners and DVDs than he can cover each week.

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