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- POLITICS
- MEDIA
- BUSINESS
- ENTERTAINMENT
- LIVING
- STYLE
- GREEN
- WORLD
- CHICAGO
- COMEDY 23/6
- VIDEO
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DVDs: Despair Triumphs at the Movies

Posted August 21, 2007 | 10:31 PM (EST)

Breaking Entertainment News



Despair travels well, which may be one reason German director Michael Haneke has gradually built an art house following around the world. *The Films Of Michael Haneke* (\$99.95; Kino) collects seven of his movies (though not the apocalyptic puzzler *The Time of The Wolf* from 2003). You get his "glaciation trilogy" about the poisonous effect of the violence spoon fed via television (is it okay to watch it on TV anyway?), the mordant *Funny Games*, Frankz Kafka's *The Castle* (an inevitable project for him), *Code Unknown* and his masterpiece *The Piano Teacher*.

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It's best to watch *Piano Teacher* without any knowledge of Haneke. The less you know about his transgressive ways, the more surprised you'll be by Isabel Huppert's tightly wound instructor and the ruggedly handsome student she falls into a masochistic relationship with.

Maybe "despair" isn't quite the right word for playwright and director David Mamet. But surely Mamet is never astonished when life throws him a curve ball, as amply demonstrated in the coldly clever *House of Games* (\$39.95; Criterion) his directorial debut 20 years ago about a therapist (Lindsay Crouse) who just knows she can't be conned by a con man (Joe Mantegna). Mamet is certainly the rare playwright to enjoy such an accomplished career in film.

If you're despairing over contemporary life, one time-honored way of attacking it is science fiction -- throw current events into the future, tweak them ever so slightly and hope that somebody realizes you're satirizing the present in hopes of changing the future. Certainly the wittiest parts of *Robocop* (\$22.98; FOX) are the frenzied news breaks and over-the-top commercials. They still seem absurd...but not so far-fetched. Peter Weller still imbues his mechanistic hero with a soul, but it's director Paul Verhoeven's revelation that we're losing ours that really stays with you.

When the world seems dirty and filthy and sad and cruel, why waste time with despair when you could do something about it? That's the cheerful approach of *Dexter: The First Season* (\$39.98; Showtime), the well-adjusted forensic specialist who does a little community service as a discriminating serial killer. The only despair felt here is over actor Michael C. Hall not getting an

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Emmy nomination for Best Actor.

Compared to Dexter, *House: Season Three* (\$59.98; Universal) is a big softie. The show is tilting a bit too much towards the private lives of all the characters (save the workplace sexual shenanigans for *Grey's Anatomy*). But Hugh Laurie keeps the soapiness in check and his bark is still wonderfully omni-present and darn near just as bad as his bite.

Finally, film buffs may be ready to despair with the minor up-tick in colorization that's taken place in the last few years. (Don't ask me why -- no matter how good colorization gets, the biggest fans for old black and white movies and TV shows are precisely the same people who hate colorization the most.) The latest example is 1935's adventure tale *She* (\$24.95; Kino), an otherwise marvelous restoration of this tale from the people behind *King Kong*. I don't care if special effects whiz Ray Harryhausen was involved and old movies were sometimes tinted; there's no need to colorize this movie. Of course, they give you both versions, so you can focus on the better-than-ever print in glorious black and white when watching this *Raiders*-like tale of derring do in a subterranean kingdom

Some people prefer a sunny disposition, so if all this despair has you down, there's always the cheery *Ugly Betty Complete First Season* (\$59.99; Buena Vista). If this candy-colored bit of foolishness can't cheer you up, nothing will. Mind you, the show is best when focusing on Betty and her real life. They've got the tone of a telenovela down pat -- they don't need the silly, over-the-top plots as well.

Also out this week: *South Park Complete Tenth Season* (\$49.99; Paramount), a series that hit its stride just a few years ago and is better than ever; *Serenity Collector's Edition* (\$26.98; Universal), the terrifically fun spin-off of the TV series *Firefly* (maybe if we buy enough copies they'll make another movie); 1991's *The Dark Backward Special Edition* (\$14.94; Sony), a comedy about a guy with a third arm that actually deserves to be called a cult classic. *Honor Roll: The Best Of College Football Vol. 1 and 2* (\$19.95 each; ESPN) has one problem: at more than two hours each, they're still too short for the fans who will always want more.

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Michael, make sure you let us know when that special edition of "It's A Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World" is released, especially as I know it's one of your favorite films of '63.

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Well, "Mad cubed" is out on DVD already, but you may be hinting at the fact that this very long movie -- 161 minutes -- was actually 192 minutes (including an overture) when it originally came out. There was a more complete version on VHS (!) and laserdisc but not complete. Some day soon someone will plunk down the money on restorers will get to work and show us the movie most haven't ever seen and only a few remember from when it first came out. I wouldn't be surprised if the film's rickety but affectionate standing with critics shot up at the LONGER version. Sometimes, more can seem like less when it fixes the pacing. Thanks for reading, Apple.

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My god, how many DVD versions of robocop are there? I guess I'll go count on amazon. Here they are in reverse chronological order:

- 1) 20th anniversery edition
- 2) Lenticular cover edition
- 3) el cheapo version (I think this is what I own)
- 4) criterion
- 5) another el cheapo version

also found in 2 different robocop trilogy box sets.

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Very true. Like so many movies (especially sci-fi movies), Robocop has been repackaged endlessly. Soon they'll put it out on Blu-Ray and /or HD-DVD as well and some poor schmuck will have to buy it all over again. I probably wouldn't have covered this umpteenth reissue if it didn't tie into my despair theme. At least it's not Terminator 2. That's surely the wmost repackaged title of all.

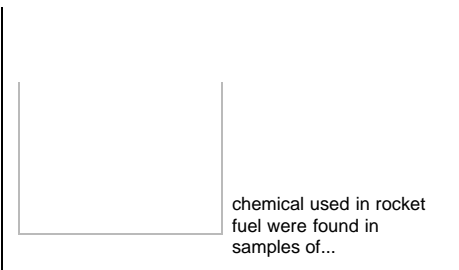
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You're too late, I didn't include the blu ray and hd dvd versions available on amazon in my list :p

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... Very entertaining article, Michael. I've seen Haneke's "House of Games", but it was "Funny Games" that invoked a visceral, unpleasant response requiring some shadow-boxing to relieve the emotional distress that movie caused. I've never watched it since, and even though there's an American remake underway (so I've read), I doubt I'll return for a second helping - it affected me that adversely. So did "Irreversible" with Vincent Cassel - one of the very few times I've ever had to pause a movie for emotional 'breathers' (those that have seen it know which two scenes I'm referring to - the attack on Monica Bellucci, and the 'fire hydrant' scene). Now, finding out that "Dexter" is available on DVD cheers me immensely, as I'm behind by several episodes - now I can catch up (on a side note, I'd gladly pay to watch Dexter 'catch up' with those two sadistic creeps from "Funny Games", oh yes indeed I would)..! ;) ...

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A Dexter/Haneke cross-over movie? It would be nice payback. Mamet's film is House of Games -- is that also the French name for Haneke's movie known as Cache in the US? That's the movie that is being remade in English -- a truly bizarre idea since it doesn't make sense as a movie outside of the French-Algerian context. I too found Irreversible deeply disturbing, but not offensively so -- a rape scene should be horrific and upsetting. Thanks for reading.

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... I realized I'd confused the two afterward, Michael, and I can only plead the late hour causing my confusion of the titles/directors. By the time I did see, it was too late to change it (that 'Edit Your Post' button we discussed in the other HuffPo thread the other day would be most welcome at times like last night - wink, wink). And I agree with your assessment of Irreversible - I've seen all kinds of 'things that go bump in the night', cinematically speaking, but it's the horror of people who look normal and yet behave like monsters that I find so frightening. I'll take the zombie or sea monster any day over the smiling gentleman standing behind me with a pair of wickedly sharp scissors in his trenchcoat pocket, just waiting for 'his moment' - *shivers*..! ;) ...

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