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## Michael Giltz

Freelance writer and raconteur  
Posted: August 28, 2009 07:05 PM

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# DVDs -- Don't Be Conned: Check Out "Duplicity"

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Sometimes, I am amazed by what happens at the box office. Sure, a tiny under-promoted film like *Bandslam* with stars only a tween would know can slip under the radar and basically come and go at the box office without creating a stir. (It's a smarter than your average bear teen high school flick. How many teen comedies about a rock band competition would make their hero *not* the singer or the songwriter or the guitarist or even the drummer but the *manager*? Damn few.

Check it out.)

But how the heck did *Duplicity* (\$29.99; Universal) come and go so quickly? It's the second film by Tony Gilroy, who granted is not yet a household name. But he worked on the screenplays for the *Bourne* trilogy and his first film as director was the marvelous *Michael Clayton*, which starred George Clooney and garnered a slew of Oscar nominations. Besides, he wrote *The Cutting Edge*, so women everywhere should be devoted fans.



But *Duplicity* opened in March and came in third, below the Nicholas Cage thriller *Knowing* and Paul Rudd's pretty amusing *I Love You, Man*. And soon it disappeared, grossing only \$40 million. Almost every single film in the Top 15 that opening weekend -- in March, mind you - grossed more money than *Duplicity* when all was said and done, often substantially more.

1. *Knowing* -- ultimately hit \$80 mil
2. *I Love You, Man* -- final gross \$71 mil
3. *Duplicity* -- \$40.5 mil

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4. *Race To Witch Mountain* -- \$67 mil
5. *Watchmen* -- \$107 mil
6. *The Last House On The Left* -- \$32 mil (finally! It took a no-name horror flick, but still)
7. *Taken* -- \$145 mil
8. *Slumdog Millionaire* -- \$141 mil
9. *Madea Goes To Jail* -- \$90 mil
10. *Coraline* -- \$75 mil
11. *Paul Blart, Mall Cop* -- \$146 mil
12. *He's Just Not That Into You* -- \$93 mil
13. *Confessions Of A Shopaholic* -- \$44 mil
14. *Gran Torino* -- \$148 mil
15. *Fired Up* -- \$17 mil (no-name teen comedy)

Did I mention it stars Julia Roberts, one of the most popular actresses of our time? It co-stars Clive Owen, who should have become a bigger box office draw thanks to this clever, sexy and adult caper about two opposing corporate spies who are working together to scam their employers or scamming each other for their employers or scamming each other *and* their employers. I wouldn't do this lightly, so when I say, think of *The Sting* and *Charade* and other sophisticated, smart entertainments, believe it. The twisty plot is catnip for fans of mysteries and quite easy to follow (it all centers around the funniest MacGuffin in years: the formula to a new moisturizer). The chemistry between Roberts and Owen is sparkling and the dialogue is effortlessly quotable. *Duplicity* is easily one of the best films of the year and exactly why God made DVDs, so films like this can be rediscovered just months after disappearing at the box office, not years later after repeated showings on cable.

Also out this week:

**THIRTYSOMETHING COMPLETE FIRST SEASON** (\$59.99; Shout Factory) -- They talked and they talked and they talked and they talked. It never hit the Top 30 in the ratings for any of the four seasons it was on the air (despite the lead-in of #12 ranked *Moonlighting* its first year and facing weak competition like *Crime Story* and *Midnight Caller*). But it won the Emmy for Best Drama the very first year it was on the air, as well as a raft of Emmys and nominations for writing, acting and directing.



Easily mocked as the yuppie show, thanks to the endlessly self-absorbed chatter of the characters (gracefully acknowledged by creators Marshall Herskovitz and Ed Zwick in their charming liner notes), *thirtysomething* is clearly now a landmark. Virtually the entire cast went on to significant success elsewhere as actors, writers and directors. And for four years, the quality of this show was high indeed. I'd argue it actually improved, but since I only joined in midway through the second season and haven't had a chance to watch the whole thing in order yet, I can't be certain. Certainly season four, with the machinations at a major ad agency led by the enigmatic Miles was a great way to leave with their heads held high. But why did I take so long to start watching? Because a casual dip into any one episode the first season could indeed be off-putting. Would they ever shut up? No, but almost everyone from every era -- not just yuppies -- are consumed and fascinated by themselves. Only *thirtysomething* was smart enough to depict this and show these people without apology. You have to sink into their world. Watching an isolated scene of Oscar Wilde, for example, can also be off-putting. No one talks like that! But watch it from the beginning and you slowly begin to accept the artifice, the arch way of talking, the zingers. Do the same with *thirtysomething* and you'll slowly become fascinated with these oh-so-smart, mirror-watching, journal-keeping, self-loving characters. Four seasons is *just* enough to justify putting it out season by season. (Frankly, I feel any show worth putting out that had three or fewer seasons should come out all at once in a complete set of the entire series.) And *thirtysomething* could have easily been a boxed set of the entire series, though the expense would have been huge for a boutique label like Shout,



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which has presented this season with care. But no one who wants to watch this set will want to watch just one; they'll want the whole shebang. And don't yuppies love conspicuous consumption?

**GOODBYE SOLO** (\$27.98; Lionsgate) -- Roger Ebert is smarter than me. You knew that, of course. But it was proved yet again when director Ramin Bahrani made his debut with *Man Push Cart*. I saw the careful composition, the keen interest in unexplored areas of the immigrant experience and tagged Bahrani as one to watch. But Ebert saw an artist, full stop. Bahrani has repaid that faith with two more films, each one a steady improvement on the one before. *Chop Shop* zoomed in tight on a kid working the alleys of a car repair and chop shop in the shadow of Shea Stadium in Queens, NY. And his best yet is *Goodbye Solo*, another look at immigrants.



This time it's cab driver Solo (Souleymane Sy Savane), who befriends an old man (Red West) that orders a cab to take him sometimes to the local cinema. Solo wants to become a flight attendant (he speaks several languages) and is on the outs with his woman, but we're still not quite sure why he shows up on the old man's doorstep. The guy is clearly depressed and possibly suicidal. (He's asked Solo to take him on a one-way trip to a lookout point in the hills of Winston-Salem, North Carolina, near where they live.) Does Solo really need a place to crash? Or is he trying to nudge the old man back to life? Bahrani's ability to work with actors has grown by leaps and bounds, his visual style has become more fluid and his storytelling ever more assured. He also seems determined to work in an indie vein that will give him the freedom to tell the stories he wants to tell. I've learned now that Bahrani is a major talent. **But Roger Ebert knew it all along.**

**SECOND SKIN** (\$19.95; Liberation) -- A rudimentary documentary about a pretty fascinating topic: the tens of millions of people around the world who are heavily involved in MMORPGs, the online role-playing games in which thousands if not tens of thousands of people can compete and work together at the same time. World of Warcraft is the most famous example but there are others. The movie follows groups of people, most of whom find their time online far more satisfying than anything in the "real" world. One couple met and fell in love online and meets for the first time while the cameras are rolling. Another person is an addict who plays so much he loses his job and his home and ends up in a halfway house (for gamers!) in another city. We also glimpse the many physically challenged people who find online existence especially alluring, as well as the low-paid workers in China who are employed to play games like World of Warcraft to earn certain valuable online items (like a sword or shield) that can be traded for actual money. Interesting.

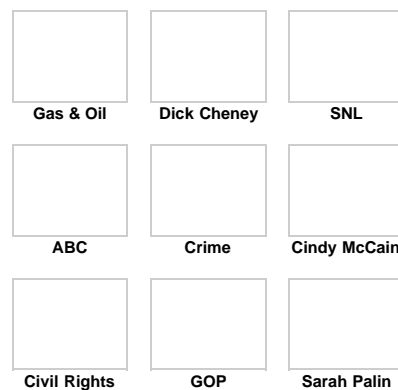
**KATYN** (\$26.98; Koch Lorber) -- Acclaimed Polish director Andrzej Wajda still burns with passion at 83. But he approaches the World War II war crime of the Soviets -- 22,000 Polish officer prisoners of war were slaughtered on the order of Stalin -- with a quiet detachment that is chilling. For most of the film, his focus is not so much on the crime itself but on the brutal effects of living with the lie that Soviet-occupied Poland held as gospel truth for many years: that the men were killed by the Nazis, not by the occupying army that held onto Poland for some 50 years. Men who knew better are shamed into suicide. Mothers refuse to believe they could lose both a husband and a son to one war. Wives who won't be quiet put themselves and their children into danger. Young men who yearn for education find the universities closed to them because they won't pay lip service to the lies of how their fathers died. Even gravestones must be smashed to pieces. But Milan Kundera was wrong -- you can't airbrush history so easily and the truth comes out eventually. And after a reserved two hours, this film concludes by actually showing the massacre and how men were shot in the back of the head one by one by one. (It's almost unbearable; somehow, seeing them all mowed down by machine gun would seem less reprehensible, less personal, which sounds ridiculous but there you are.) A clear-eyed cry of despair.

**THE ASTONISHING WORK OF TEZUKA OSAMU** (\$29.95; Kino/KimStim) -- The title of this DVD is no lie. Osamu is a legend, often dubbed the father of anime and the god of manga. He would be famous forever if *Astro Boy* were his only work. But this DVD collects 15 of his best



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shorts and for me they were revelatory. The three longest -- all about 30 minutes in length -- are also the best. "Tales Of The Street Corner" captures Osamu's genius: he loved to layer in multiple stories as well as embrace all sorts of animation styles. And cutesy storylines and whimsical finales were not his forte: there is nothing scandalous in any of these shorts but they are definitely not for kiddies. This one combines a little girl who drops her teddy bear out a window and onto a drainpipe with the story of a mouse as well as the playful interactions of the posters on the street wall, which casually depict the militaristic take-over of their world. "Pictures Of An Exhibition" is even better, using portraits in an art museum to tell the stories of heroes of our time, though the heroes of Osamu are quite tongue in cheek people like an industrialist, a TV presenter, a beatnik and the like. Each one is a self-contained bit of wicked satire. Best of all is "Legend Of The Forest," which shows the denizens of a forest reacting to the encroachment of lumberjacks who are tearing their world apart. It also casually works its way through animation history, using every style from stills and simple black and white sketches to full-blown color. There's also enough unexpected violence to make *Bambi* seem tame in comparison. The 10 briefer shorts are just as astonishing, including the gem "Jumping," which shows a little girl jumping or perhaps pogo-sticking down the street and takes this premise to charming extremes. More than any other animator I know, Osamu changes his style of animation to suit the story he wants to tell. Each short could easily be by a different artist, from the formal beauty of the samurai tale in "Muramosa" to the snappy, 60s bachelor pad style of "Memory." Any lover of animation should feel compelled to see it. Their other release this week is *Extreme Animation: Phil Mulloy* (\$29.95; Kino) and if it's half as good as this one, it'll be a keeper too.

**THE LAST DAYS OF DISCO** (\$39.98; Criterion) -- I enjoyed *The Last Days Of Disco*, but I have the sneaking suspicion I'll enjoy it even more on a second and third viewing. Writer-director Whit Stillman has something few directors can claim: a truly distinctive comic voice. He appeared full-blown (perhaps springing out of the head of Zeus, but I can't be sure) with *Metropolitan* in 1990 and followed it in 1994 with the similarly acclaimed but somehow less visible *Barcelona*. Then came *Disco* in 1998, which looked at a fictional night club a la Studio 54 and was overshadowed by a vaguely similar film, *54*, out the same year. Since then, nothing, though we had every right to expect a film from Stillman in 2002 and 2006. The typically droll story involves two young women hoping to make it in publishing: Chloe Sevigny, who will be the object of affection for virtually every man in the film at one point or another, and Kate Beckinsale, as her hilariously self-absorbed "friend" who undermines Sevigny at every opportunity. In front of her, Chris Eigeman, naturally, is on board as an assistant manager at the hottest club in town and Matt Keeslar (of *The Middleman*) is wonderful as a wounded assistant DA with a breakdown in his past and (he hopes) Sevigny in his future. It's polished, witty stuff and Criterion is right to enshrine the film. Stillman is a talent.

**NEWCASTLE** (\$24.95; Wolfe) -- I want to encourage surfing movies about handsome young men who question their sexuality whenever I can, but *Newcastle* is ultimately too thin on the ground to recommend to anyone other than hardcore surfers who will watch any film about their passion and those who like to watch *them*. A bunch of mates in Australia hang out and surf and when they're not surfing they're skinny-dipping in the ocean and flirting with girls. At the center are two brothers, the one a top-notch surfer who can't match up to his older brother (a major success at the sport till injuries forced him out) and the other a pale-skinned intellectual who doesn't surf and has put streaks of color in his jet black hair. (No bonus points for guessing he's the gay one.) All is amiable until melodrama strikes and the actors are asked to deliver more than jibes at their buddies. The one plus of the film is that the filmmakers have a real love for surfing: instead of filming the action scenes with quick cuts and lots of pop music, they slow it down and capture the gorgeousness of the sport in spades. (Although, to my very untrained eye, the lads aren't especially good or just not challenged by the waves they're filmed on.)

**THE WINDOW** (\$24.95; Film Movement) -- Don't get me wrong: most of the movies that play at film festivals and never see the light of day probably don't deserve a theatrical release. Even if they have some merit, they don't have a bloody chance in hell of making money at the box office. Yet every once in a while, a movie plays at a film festival and you're surprised it *isn't* seen more broadly. Film Movement cherry picks the best of those orphans and presents them as part of their DVD of the Month Club, a chance to see movies that deserve an audience but slipped through the cracks. The DVD for August is *The Window*, and if it's a sign of their general quality **the \$11 a month DVD club** is a safe bet for cineastes. This Argentine drama shows an old bed-ridden writer, recovering from a recent heart attack and waiting for the arrival of his prodigal son. That's it. But director Carlos Sorin captures the moment to moment life of one day with revealing specificity. Sorin knows that for an infirm old man an open window is a constant source of news, that a journey across the room is an adventure, and that urinating outdoors with a fresh breeze on your face is sheer bliss. The only false note is the son's girlfriend, a cell phone obsessed cliché. But the film ends beautifully and earns its quiet power with ease. You can also **buy the film at Amazon** and

rent it on Netflix.

**Also out this month:** *The Mama Cass Television Program* (\$14.98; Infinity), the poor in imaginative titling but rich in music TV special starring Cass and also featuring Joni Mitchell, Mary Travers and John Sebastian of Lovin' Spoonful; *One Tree Hill Season Six* (\$59.98; Warner Bros.), which can't quite match the time-jump rejuvenation of Season Five but has fun going back in time by recreating the Forties for episode 11; the *Little Miss Sunshine* wannabe *Sunshine Cleaning* (\$29.98; Anchor Bay); *Children Of The Corn* on BluRay (\$29.97; Anchor Bay), the Stephen King chiller that surprisingly launched a boatload of sequels (Malachai still wants you); Lucille Ball's one-too-many dips into the comedy well with *Here's Lucy Season One* (\$29.98; MPI), tired but welcome to fans who want it all; *Smallville Season Eight* (\$59.98; Warner Bros.) gets darker to good effect but if the show hangs around any longer they're gonna have to call it *Middleville* or *Largeville*; *The Lee Strobel Collection* (\$24.98; Lionsgate), three documentaries about the historical and scientific basis for Christianity that isn't hard-headed enough for non-believers but will inform believers who have only a minimal knowledge of scholarship and science; *NCIS Sixth Season* (\$55.98; Paramount) has a dependable cast led by Mark Harmon, but despite modest continuing story-lines it's really the sort of show perfect for catching on reruns but not necessarily one you need to own and watch in order; *Visions Of Britain & Ireland* (\$49.99 on BluRay) offers eye-popping aerial views of those countries as seen on the PBS series, including four and a half hours of programming and demo-worthy images for Anglophiles; *Scrubs Eighth Season* (\$39.98; ABC Video) is the sound of a once-quirky, distinctive show that has run out of ideas; and sports fans of NYC will love *NFL New York Giants 10 Greatest Games* (\$49.98; Warner Bros.) while fans on the West Coast will love *NFL San Francisco 49ers Five Greatest Games: Super Bowl Victories* (\$39.92; Warner Bros.). As a New Yorker, need I point out that the Giants have twice as many great games in their set as San Fran? No, I didn't think so.

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