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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer and raconteur

Posted: January 12, 2010 04:40 PM

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DVDs -- Fractured Fairy Tales

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Convoluted screenplays -- the sort that start in the middle, jump to the end and then back towards the beginning and then forward and back and forward again -- have become a cliche in Hollywood. *Pulp Fiction* certainly wasn't the first to tackle it, but slowly and surely its influence has been so strong that seeing a film that actually progresses chronologically would seem revelatory.

But just when I despaired about the overweening cleverness of screenwriters confusing a chopped up timeline with intelligence and craft, two films popped

up to prove there's still life in this unconventional convention.



THE HANGOVER (\$34.99 Special Edition and \$35.99 BluRay; Warner Bros.) is simply a phenomenon that gave the raunchy bachelor party genre a new level of...sophistication isn't quite the right word for a movie with goats and tigers in a hotel room, but you know what I mean. It turned a simple tale about

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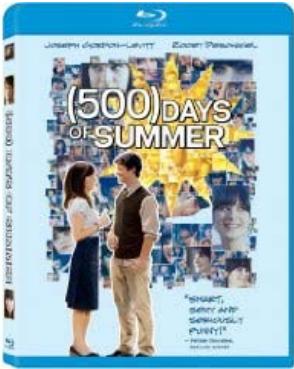
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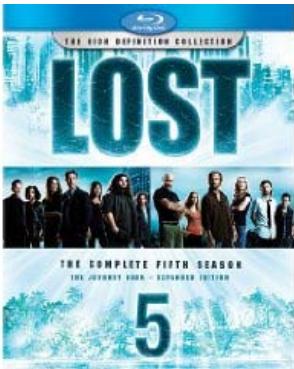
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guys waking up from a serious night of partying and unable to find the groom so they can take him to the wedding into a mystery with layers and layers of revelation. But instead of stunning reveals a la a mystery or thriller, they simply revealed one boneheaded bit of behavior after another. And since most people can relate to the feeling of waking up with a headache and wondering exactly what the hell they'd done the night before, it resonated with audiences to a remarkable degree. *The Hangover* is now one of the most successful comedies of all time, giving Bradley Cooper a star turn, Ed Helms his best role yet and turning Zach Galifianakis into the supporting player du jour. People feel really strongly about this movie. When I sheepishly admit I didn't love it (though the screenplay structure did keep me engaged), I get more grief than I've received over any movie since *Napoleon Dynamite*. On sale, there's only a \$5 difference between the standard single disc and the BluRay Special Edition (\$20) which contains an unrated version, picture in picture commentary, Mike Tyson singing all of "In The Air Tonight," a gag reel and 100 photos from the missing camera (an extension of the gag that kept even the credits amusing during the theatrical run).



(500) DAYS OF SUMMER (\$29.98 regular and \$39.99 BluRay; FOX) -- But all the jumping through hoops in the world won't help a love story without chemistry between the stars. Fortunately, *(500) Days Of Summer* has that in spades thanks to Joseph Gordon-Levitt and Zooey Deschanel, two excellent actors who have never been more charming and sexy than they are here. In this film, the chopped up storyline (we jump back and forth in their relationship from bliss to disillusion to first tentative romance) keeps a conventional tale off balance and ultimately quite moving and fresh. Two coworkers who strike up a relationship, Gordon-Levitt and Deschanel are both sweet and stinging, whether Gordon-Levitt is walking down the street and literally bursting into song after his first night with his girlfriend or whether Deschanel is keeping him at arms length when they meet months after their breakup. We're told at the beginning that this is not a love story and we shouldn't expect a happy ending. It's a testament to their skill and chemistry that we don't want to believe that's true. A far more modest hit than *The Hangover*, this film played and played and played in movie theaters for months on end, showing the sort of legs you almost never see anymore. It is easily one of the best films of the year. The BluRay contains a portable digital copy you can download as well as the usual commentary tracks, deleted scenes and the like. As with all BluRays, I wish they were priced at \$20 and \$25 with the sale price taking it down even further. Trying to raise DVD prices via BluRay is a big mistake. The \$10 gap in price is too big and no the answer is not to raise the price of standard DVDS.



LOST THE COMPLETE FIFTH SEASON (\$59.99 regular and \$79.99 on BluRay but on sale for only \$4 more than the regular sale price; ABC Studios) -- A far more typical use of a remarkably convoluted timeline comes via *Lost*, the iconic TV series that lost its way but -- according to many fans -- regained its footing once they plunged whole hog into this storyline where the island jumps back and forth in time. Anyone wanting to get ready for the final season starting in February should start right here. The bonus features are actually pretty essential, with one section showing the actors and producers and writers got

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twisted into pretzels trying to keep the timeline straight as well. The BluRay exclusive features include Lost University, a college-type course in the themes and stories of the show. (No need to wait for some hip professor to add it to the curriculum and no need to be 18-21 to take it.) To some, that might seem daunting; to others, it's a way to explore the show even further. Unquestionably, the show looks terrific on BluRay. Just for fun, watch the seventh episode, then the third, then the 18th, then the first and see if it makes any difference.

ALSO OUT ON DVD NOW



EXTRACT (\$29.9 regular DVD and \$39.99 BluRay; Miramax) -- Mike Judge created *Beavis and Butt-head*. (I still wish he'd make another feature film with them.) Mike Judge created *King Of The Hill*, one of the best sitcoms of the past 20 years. Mike Judge created *Office Space*, a cult comedy that has been watched a gazillion times by office drones everywhere. So when he releases a new feature film starring Jason Bateman (the anchor of *Arrested Development*), you would think people would pay attention. But they didn't. Sure, he made the godawful *Idiocracy*, but everyone is allowed to swing and miss a few times. This movie is very, very funny and just gets better the more you watch it. Judge's deadpan style suits Bateman perfectly and he shines in the role of a basically decent guy trying to cash in by selling his flavor extract company only to be distracted by a freak accident striking one of his employees, a bored wife, a best bud with questionable advice (played hilariously by Ben Affleck) and a gold-digger embodied by Mila Kunis. Ten years from now, you're gonna love this. Why not get an early jump on the bandwagon?



ALL ABOUT STEVE (\$29.99 regular DVD and \$39.99 BluRay; FOX) -- Sandra Bullock and Bradley Cooper have had career years. This movie is not the reason why. Bullock had *The Proposal*, the biggest hit of her life until *The Blind Side* became an even bigger hit and gave her a shot at an Oscar nomination. Bradley Cooper had *The Hangover* and *He's Just Not That Into You* and filmed the first of a franchise, *The A-Team*. Somewhere in the middle, they had this awkward film about a blind date that encourages Bullock to start stalking TV news cameraman Cooper as he travels around the country to film breaking stories. Quite simply, it proves the smartness of actors who just keep working. Release three films in a year and one of them is likely to click. Release one film every three years and you may find yourself with a turkey and nothing new to promote for years to come.

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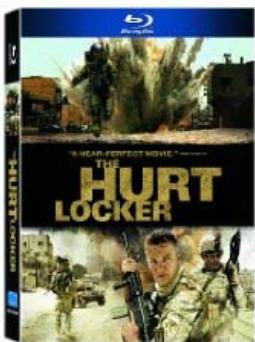
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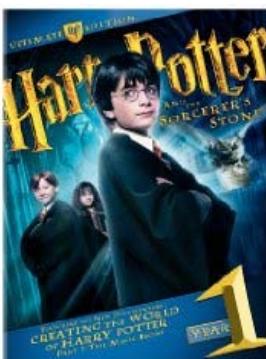
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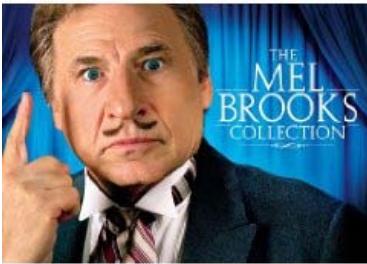
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THE HURT LOCKER (\$26.99 regular and \$34.99 BluRay; Summit) -- Here's what I don't like about this film: a therapist character is too stock, too clearly there just to give our tight-lipped heroes someone to talk to in war-torn Iraq. His behavior in the field beggars belief. And the story overall is pretty conventional -- soldiers doing a tense, scary job and finding the adrenaline of war makes adapting to civilian life nigh on impossible. But what makes the movie special is the top-notch acting by the men and the direction of Kathryn Bigelow, who is rightly the front-runner for the Oscar. She milks more drama out of the scenes where nothing blows up than most directors could with a boatload of pyrotechnics. One iconic shot shows a bomb disposal guy pulling up a wire and exposing a string of bombs that encircle him -- it'll take your breath away. This is NOT an ideal movie to see at home, so if you can still go to the movie theaters now or around the Oscars, by all means do. That sense of being "trapped" with the movie and the men doing such tense, dangerous work is hard to duplicate at home. But then you can watch it again on DVD. Very modest extras include a commentary track and a brief making-of docu. Dollars to donuts they'll come out with a loaded special edition after the Oscars, so if extras are your thing you might want to wait.

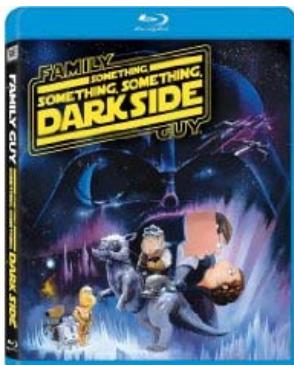
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HARRY POTTER -- A slew of releases as we look ahead to the final two-part movies next fall and the summer of 2011. First, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (\$34.99 Special Edition and \$39.99 BluRay; Warner Bros. -- though on sale the BluRay is \$1 cheaper than the Special Edition and \$4.50 more than the single disc basic edition; Whew!) In a sense, this film is treading water till the finale. But I found it perhaps the most enjoyable since Alfonso Cuaron's *Prisoner of Azkaban*. The main reason is the production design. Hogwarts and the magical world in general look lived in and real, not like the set for a theme park ride. That realism gives weight to the high stakes here, whether it's the soul of poor old Draco Malfoy or the heart of Dumbledore. Extras include footage from *Deathly Hallows*, a look at Rowling as she laid the series to rest and the real theme park ride at Universal Orlando. Many more extras abound but if extras are your thing, maybe you should wait before purchasing this film. It's sure to be superseded by the Ultimate Edition down the road. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone Ultimate Edition* and *Chamber of Secrets Ultimate Edition* (\$39.99; Warner Bros.) are (presumably) the final word in Potter DVDs until they release a boxed set with every film. As fat as the biggest books in the series, they are truly jam-packed with both theatrical and extended versions of the films, extras and a small hardbound book of photos all packaged nicely in a slipcover case. If you just can't get enough of these films, the Ultimate Editions are for you.



THE MEL BROOKS COLLECTION ON BLURAY (\$139.99; FOX) -- BluRay? So fancy-schmancy, Mr. Tony-winning Putting On Airs Brooks! What? Regular DVD is not good enough for you? In fact, the low brow humor of Mel Brooks should be on VHS or even 16mm just to give the right tone of goofy, anything goes attitude to this stuff. This set contains nine films he made for MGM and or Fox, including his masterpiece *Young Frankenstein*, the funny *Blazing Saddles* and *High Anxiety*, the unnecessary remake of *To Be Or Not To Be* and lots of other movies with so-so ratios of good to bad jokes, movies like *Spaceballs*, *Robin Hood: Men In Tights*, *History Of The World Part I* (the first R-rated movie I snuck into and the trailer for *Part II* is still funnier than anything else in the film), *Silent Movie* and his early work *The Twelve Chairs*. Fine, all fine. But they shoved it into yet another bulky, unlovable boxed set. This is not anyone's idea of luxury; it's everyone's idea of a pain in the neck because it doesn't fit alongside your other movies and it's too easy to drive yourself crazy trying to pull out the DVDs from their little slots. Mel, yes. Boxed set packaging, no.

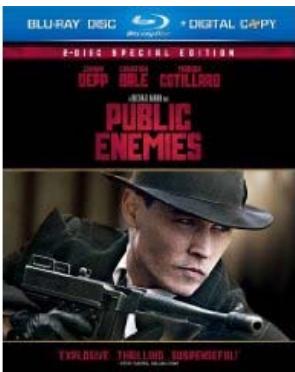


FAMILY GUY: SOMETHING SOMETHING SOMETHING DARKSIDE (\$22.98 regular or \$29.98 BluRay; FOX) -- Seth McFarlane must identify with George Lucas. Both have created massively popular smash hits, spun them off into other series and yet also deal with a lot of grief from fanboys who diss them. At least Lucas has the original *Star Wars* trilogy to point to with pride. McFarlane just has *Family Guy*, which has always come way back in third place compared to *The Simpsons* or *South Park*. So it's no surprise *Family Guy* would spoof *Star Wars*, just like *Robot Chicken* and so many other shows have done. You can't really argue with those who say this take on *The Empire Strikes Back* isn't as fresh as their first spoof. But maybe they'll pull it together for *Return Of The Jedi*. At the very least, McFarlane and Lucas can have a beer together and commiserate over the losers like me who seem to do nothing but run them down.

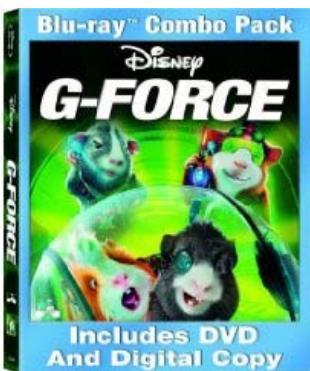


MYSTERY SCIENCE THEATER 3000: VOLUME XVI (\$64.99; Shout) -- Talking back to the screen during a dumb movie never gets old, as anyone who sat in a movie theater during Leap Year can

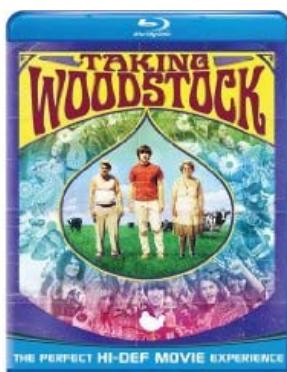
attest. This limited edition contains four more episodes never been released on DVD, including *Warrior Of The Lost World* and *Night Of The Blood Beast* and...oh, what do you care? The movies are awful, the comments are (often) funny and you get a Tom Servo toy in the bargain.



PUBLIC ENEMIES (\$34.98 Special Edition or \$36.98 BluRay; Universal) -- Michael Mann is too talented a director to make a completely dull movie, but he comes pretty close here. Johnny Depp is the gangster John Dillinger, presented here as charming and decent, with Christian Bale tense and off-kilter as the G-man determined to hunt him down. Call me old-fashioned (or maybe it's new-fashioned since old movies often showed criminals as lovable) but I just wasn't in the mood to see the soft side of a brutal man who killed people who got in his way. Another problem was the talented Marion Cotillard, who perhaps wasn't quite ready to tackle her first English language role. Her performance was always a beat or two behind, as if she had to think through the words she was saying. Still, Stephen Lang is memorable in a small role (much better here than in his laughable cartoon of a soldier in *Avatar*) and it all looks smashing. Maybe I'm just being a fuddy duddy. Loads of extras, of course.



G-FORCE (\$29.99 regular, \$39.99 Special and \$44.99 BluRay; Disney) -- I don't rate movies on a sliding scale. A good movie is a good movie, whether it's a family film geared to kids or an art house film from Taiwan. But, yes, my *expectations* are on a sliding scale. I wasn't expecting much from a movie about guinea pigs who double as secret agents. How could I? But *G-Force* didn't even meet my modest hopes for a diverting 88 minutes. I have no objections to a flick about talking guinea pigs on a secret mission. Heck, I WANT to see a movie about talking guinea pigs on a secret mission. Just not this one.



TAKING WOODSTOCK (\$29.98 regular or \$39.98 BluRay; Universal) -- Director Ang Lee is a square and I say that with affection for a man who has made some of my favorite films. But he is probably completely wrong to tackle a story about the wild and wacky days surrounding the Woodstock concert. The real Eliot Tiber had a wacky, outrageous life and his involvement in Woodstock by giving them a

license and seeing his folks' motel overrun with hippies was just the capper. But here Tiber (played by Demetri Martin) is just an uptight closeted gay guy who has a mind-blowing experience that weekend but can't even find the courage to come out to his parents. The concert is offstage, of course and thank God. You wouldn't want to see people imitating Jimi Hendrix. Jonathan Groff is perfect casting as the angelic-looking but preternaturally calm promoter Michael Lang. But like everyone else here, he has too little to do. Watch the classic concert film instead.



FARSCAPE: THE COMPLETE SERIES (\$149.95; A&E) -- Finally, a nod to a terrific boxed set I'm just beginning to explore. Like many sci-fi series, *Farscape* has a cult following, so it's hard to suss out when a TV series is genuinely great (*Firefly*) and when it just has a loyal fanbase (I'm too afraid to say *Babylon 5* or *Torchwood* because whatever show I mention will cause its fans to howl in anger over my idiocy). *Farscape* has the bonus attraction of some of the best puppetry work Jim Henson Workshop ever did, which brings a whole new level of fandom to the table. But in an era where bulky boxed sets for TV shows like *Dawson's Creek* and *Ally McBeal* are the standard -- making it impossible for anyone who doesn't want the series to sit on their coffee table do anything but shove it into a closet -- it's wonderful to see a show presented compactly and with care. All four seasons are here, along with bonus discs, all presented in what I believe are their proper ratios (the first three seasons in standard TV box size, the fourth widescreen.) It's true that rights issues kept them from including a TV movie wrapup, but everything else is here in solid picture and sound. And it's on sale at Amazon for \$60, which is less than a dollar for each of the 88 episodes. This is exactly how TV shows should be preserved, in a relatively inexpensive manner for fans and in a way that newbies can dive in with confidence. Well done.

--30--

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NOTE TO READERS: I was provided with review copies of all the DVDs covered here. However, I would add that I receive more DVDs than I can ever cover and -- with the exception of elaborate boxed sets -- I almost never guarantee any particular DVD will be reviewed.

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Citizen54 11:30 PM on 1/12/2010

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I stopped reading at "Godawful Idiocracy" because clearly we do not agree on what constitutes a good movie. In a hundred years, Mike Judge will look like Orwell -- i.e., right on the money.

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Michael Giltz 12:20 PM on 1/13/2010
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That's a shame. I've liked -- even loved -- virtually everything else Mike Judge has done. And I'm hardly alone on Idiocracy. At least I bothered to watch it whereas most people didn't since it came and went without a trace and got dreadful reviews. If you're going to tune out anyone who didn't like or didn't see Idiocracy, then you're tuning out 99.99% of people in America. And finally, the only critic I'd ever agree with 100% is myself....and sometimes not even then. Hopefully, I can at least let you know about new releases and provide some info you didn't have in these columns. Expecting any critic to always agree with you is just impossible.

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NHBill 07:53 PM on 1/12/2010

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Reviewing DVDs you have to grade on a curve. Your not schlepping to the theater and spending obscene money for popcorn. Heck you might even be renting the movie with your remote. So here goes: "The Hangover" is one of the funniest movies in years! You just might want to own it. "(500) Days of Summer" is a nice rental. If you are under say 40 your going to enjoy this. Older than that I'm not so sure. They took much of the joy out of this new Harry Potter but if you a fan you probably already own it. I liked "Idiocracy" better than "Extract" which is not saying much. TV Shows, Mel Brooks and Family Guy fans know what they are getting. "Public Enemies" is disappointing. Rent do not buy. "Taking Woodstock" is wonderful! Rent for sure!

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Michael Giltz 09:48 PM on 1/12/2010
59 Fans



Thanks for weighing in. Bummed you saw and didn't care for Extract; everyone I've sent it to has enjoyed it. The only thing I liked about Idiocracy was the sight gag of a La-Z-Boy with a built in toilet so you'd never have to walk away from watching TV.

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NHBill 11:02 AM on 1/13/2010

185 Fans

It's got electrolytes.

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