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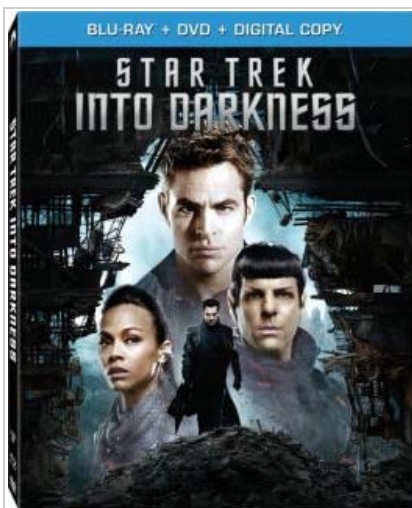
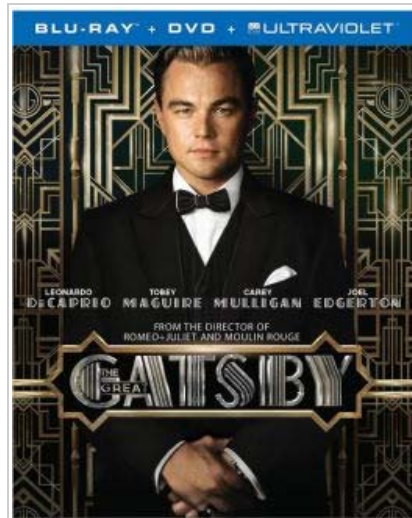
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ENTERTAINMENT

DVDs: Is the Hit Film *Now You See Me* the Savior of Hollywood?

Posted: 09/15/2013 2:44 pm

Here we go -- some top new movies, including a film that points to Hollywood's future, the greatest documentary of all time, some cool animated films, a few gems from the vaults and a TV roundup.



NOW YOU SEE ME (\$39.99 BluRay combo; Summit)

THE GREAT GATSBY (\$35.99 BluRay combo; Warner Bros.)

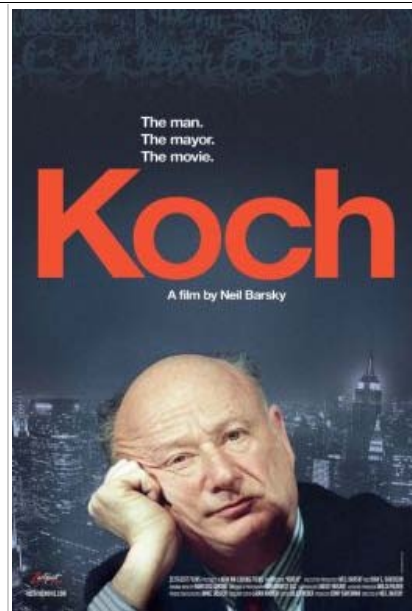
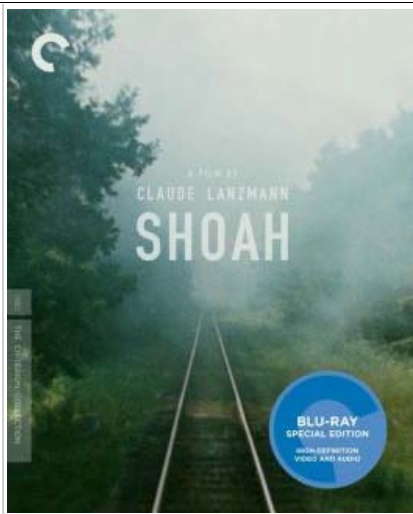
STAR TREK INTO DARKNESS (\$39.99 BluRay combo; Paramount)

STORIES WE TELL (\$19.99 DVD; Lionsgate) -- Hollywood is "reeling" from a summer filled with high profile flops like *The Lone Ranger*, *After Earth* with Will Smith and *R.I.P.D.* (Actually, the summer included record grosses and a strong uptick in ticket sales but that never stopped people from panicking.) What to do? The truth is that Hollywood is far less scared about spending \$175 million on a potential franchise than it is about spending \$75 million on a movie like *Now You See Me*. It's made for adults (though kids can enjoy it), it has that midrange budget that makes the movie a serious financial risk without any upside in theme park rides or toys and it's not based on anything people already know. But then magic happened and *Now You See Me* became a worldwide smash grossing more than \$310 million and spawned a sequel. Jesse Eisenberg leads a stellar cast that includes Mark Ruffalo, Michael Caine and Morgan Freeman in a twisty tale about illusionists pulling off a bank heist. It's filled with enough twists to rival *The Sting* and audiences responded.

Baz Luhrmann's *The Great Gatsby* is very similar but with some major pluses. It's geared towards adults (though kids can enjoy the film and the hip-hop, jazzy soundtrack), it has a great cast led by Leonardo DiCaprio and it's based on one of the most famous and best-selling novels of all time. It made almost exactly the same amount of money as *Now You See Me* but that movie's a hit and this is a big flop. Why? Because it cost roughly \$190 million to make. Why are we discussing budgets? Shouldn't we just be talking about the quality of the film? Well, the movies that are hits and flops financially determine what movies get made down the road so movie fans have to care. If *The Great Gatsby* had been made for even \$100 million, it would be a major hit at least at the box office. Dramatically, it got pilloried. Maybe now people will realize that F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel does not lend itself well to dramatization. Please, no miniseries in 20 years!

Of course the answer to Hollywood's summer of high profile flops is not to stop making franchise films. *Man Of Steel* was a big hit and *Star Trek Into Darkness* was an even bigger one, given the impact it will have on a potential new *Star Trek* TV series and so on. This sequel by JJ Abrams is the highest grossing *Trek* film of all time, even adjusting for inflation. I found his first *Trek* film to be absolutely terrific, one of the best movies of that year. For me, the sequel was a disappointment. Not awful, but not nearly as good -- and the hat tip to 9-11 at the end I frankly found offensive. Guys, it's a *Trek* film. Please don't try and hitch its wagon to important historical events -- sci-fi is always better if we draw the parallels, not the movie.

So it's not the *type* of movies Hollywood makes but the *MIX* of movies they make. You need big rolls of the dice like *The Lone Ranger* and *Star Trek Into Darkness*. You need films for adults like *Now You See Me*. And you need small passion projects like Sarah Polley's acclaimed documentary *Stories We Tell*. The actress discovered that she hadn't been told the truth about who her real biological father was. She set about to interview all her relatives and family friends as she unraveled this secret and the result is one of the most intriguing and well reviewed movies of the year. It's Polley's second film and she's already proven herself a significant talent. Hollywood would be wise to bankroll her next film...assuming the budget isn't \$225 million.



SHOAH (\$99.99 BluRay; Criterion)

KOCH (\$29.99 DVD; Zeitgeist)

WE STEAL SECRETS: THE STORY OF WIKILEAKS (\$19.99 DVD; Focus) -- *Shoah* is

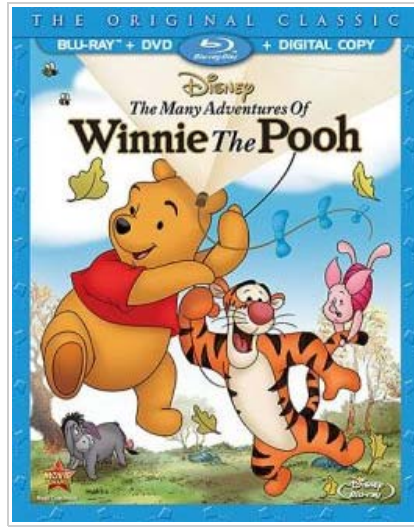
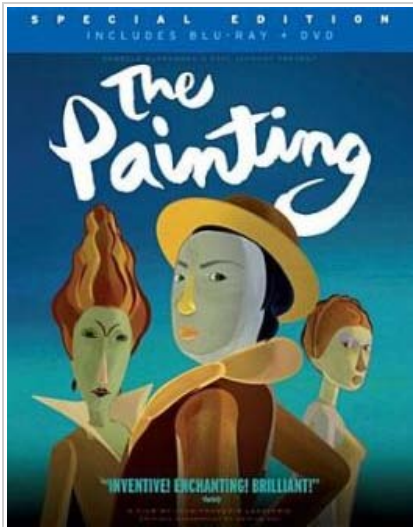
one of the greatest films of all time. It's also nine hours long and about the Holocaust so that usually sends most people running in the opposite direction, however noble they consider the film or the act of remembering. Even for those that do tackle it, the film is so Significant (and rightly so) it's often treated as more than a film. Criterion's beautiful packaging of this new BluRay set is a case in point. The sealed package contains some discreet rave reviews but when you pull off the wrapping you realize those quotes are printed on the plastic covering and once it's removed the film is not sullied with anything as banal as a blurb. It's a classy touch but a telling one as well. This set is

faultless in its presentation and is bursting with extras like three more films by director Claude Lanzmann, new interviews and more. But let's set aside the historical weight of this project for a moment and just consider this as a movie. It's wildly entertaining and I mean that. You are enthralled the moment it begins. It has the bleakest of black humor at moments, piercing sadness, dramatic revelations, characters you will never forget and much much more. If you're like me, you might begin watching with a sense of duty but soon be on the edge of your seat. By avoiding the "why" and sticking relentlessly to the "how" of the Holocaust, Lanzmann created an endlessly astonishing movie. At the natural break about halfway through, you will be exhausted and wrung out. Do you really want to plunge back in? But the moment you do (be it the next day or the next week) you'll be immediately mesmerized again. Yes, it's Important and Significant and a Monument. But don't worry -- it's also a great movie in every sense of the word. Don't cheat yourself of the experience of watching it. No, you won't watch it every year a la *Casablanca*. But I've seen three times since it came out in 1985 (thanks to a rave from Siskel & Ebert) and I'm sure I'll watch it three times again before I'm done.

No movie can compete with that documentary. But *Koch* is a look at one of New York's most vivid mayors. He's a polarizing figure, thanks to his closeted private life and studied indifference to AIDS victims because of that fact. (Koch denied this and insisted he was straight.) Throw in about a half dozen other issues that New Yorkers can get into screaming matches about (transit strikes, endorsing George W. Bush and so on) and

you've got yourself a colorful character. I can't imagine enjoying a documentary film about Rudy Giuliani or David Dinkins very much, but Koch? Absolutely.

Perhaps instead of waiting for the fictional film about Julian Assange starring Benedict Cumberbatch you could just dive into the real thing and watch *We Steal Secrets*, the latest film from the Academy Award winning director of *Taxi To The Dark Side* and *Client 9: The Rise and Fall Of Eliot Spitzer*. Drawing parallels between Assange and Pfc. Chelsea Manning (born Bradley), it's so of the moment you'll want to peruse recent news stories for the latest updates on what's happened to everyone involved.



FROM UP ON POPPY HILL (\$34.99 BluRay

combo; GKids/Studio Ghibli)

BETTY BOOP: THE ESSENTIAL COLLECTION VOLUME 1 (\$29.99 BluRay; Olive)

THE PAINTING (\$34.99 BluRay; Gkids/Cinedigm)

THE MANY ADVENTURES OF WINNIE THE POOH (\$36.99 BluRay; Disney) -- It's heartbreaking news to hear the greatest living animator Hayao Miyazaki is retiring. His final project is the current release *The Wind Rises*. He also co-wrote the screenplay for this film directed by his son Goro. It's set in Yokahama in Japan right before it hosts the Olympic Games -- a typically unexpected subject matter for an animated film. We can hope more ideas and scripts remain to be turned into other projects but if this is the final bow of the genius behind *Spirited Away* and *My Neighbor Totoro*, it's a fine send-off.

Miyazaki was probably inspired by Betty Boop, even though they have nothing in common. Many of Miyazaki's films are perfect for kids. Boop broke ground by being a sexy cartoon definitely geared towards adults, even though kids liked her squeaky voice and catch phrase "Boop-oop-a-doop!" The naughty entendres went over their heads. This is the first of four volumes; it's not strictly restored but it was nicely mastered for BluRay. The price

is steep for just twelve shorts, but this is a boutique label and enthusiasts are lucky to see these at all. Still, anyone who wants this will want all four volumes so they should have just released all 40+ cartoons in one set, even if the price were still as high.

Miyazaki inspired many animators who came after (like the folks at Pixar). Among his contemporaries is the far less well known French animator Jean-Francois Laguionie. He's only made four feature films in his lengthy career but this exceptionally well-reviewed film is a great capper. *The Painting* is set in an unfinished canvas where the fully drawn characters in oil lord it over the half-drawn characters who in turn sneer at the "Sketchies." Three of them wander off the canvas into the painter's studio. That echoes the plot of some classic Looney Tunes shorts, but the result here isn't anarchy but moving and fascinating. *The Painting* deserves much more attention than it received here in the US.

Finally, Disney shows you don't need to push boundaries or techniques to create a gem, just passion and the right approach to the right material. *Winnie The Pooh* is hand-drawn but not with the completeness of say *Pinocchio*. They turn this economizing gesture into a virtue by having the backdrops look like illustrations in a novel. The result is that you feel like you're watching a storybook come to life, as if you were turning the pages and suddenly the characters started talking. Combine that with great voice work, charming songs and the perfect tone and you've got a masterpiece. This BluRay contains the short "A Day For Eeyore" and more.



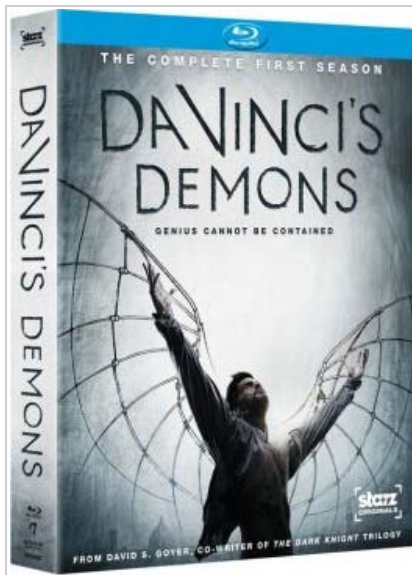
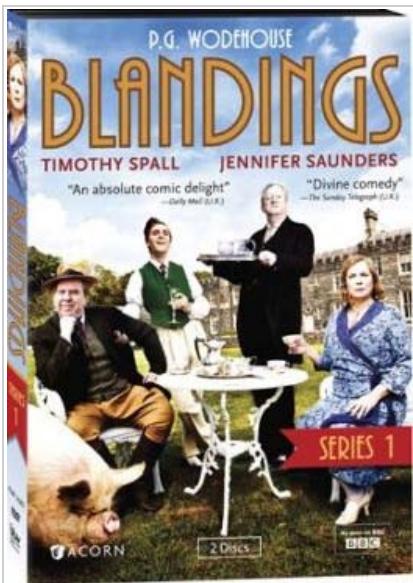
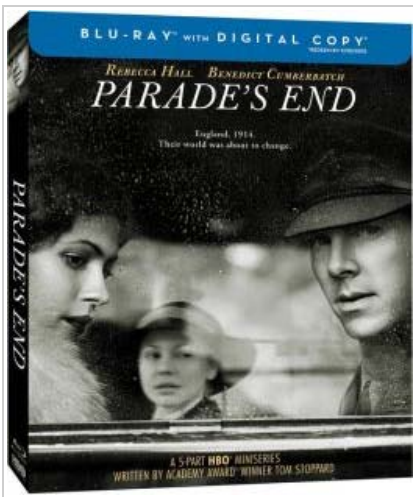
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ONLY THE VALIANT
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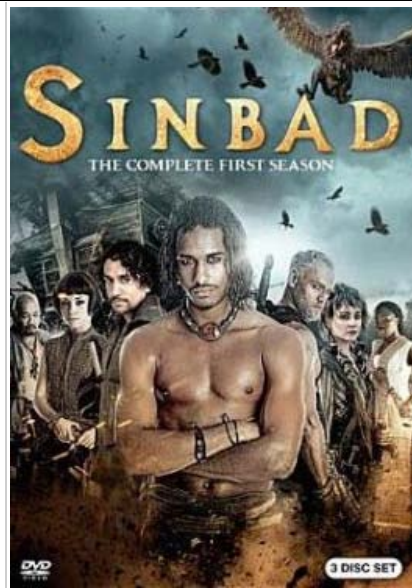
MY FAVORITE SPY (\$24.99 BluRay; Olive) -- It's pure melodrama but *Penny Serenade* is elevated by the presence of Cary Grant and Irene Dunne. Still, a soap opera is a soap opera and this weepie has still born babies, difficult adoptions, sudden illness, natural disasters and more. The stars can only do so much, though Grant's scene in a courtroom is a keeper.

Gregory Peck is the hard-bitten military man at the heart of *Only The Valiant*. He's by the book and his own men hate him, especially after their favored leader is killed while following orders. So Peck has more to fear from his own men than the Apaches they're fighting. Good tech credits and a strong cast make this above average.

My favorite Bob Hope movies are surely the *Road* films with Bing Crosby. But the *My Favorite...* trilogy (*Blonde*, *Brunette* and *Spy*) are close behind. In *My Favorite Spy*, two-bit comic Hope happens to be a dead ringer for a brilliant spy, though all Hope can hear is the word "dead." Nonetheless, he's suddenly on his way to Tangiers to complete a dangerous mission and fall into the arms of the beautiful Hedy Lamarr). There are worse ways to go.

THE





OFFICE SEASON 9 (\$59.99 BluRay; NBC/Universal)

CHICAGO FIRE SEASON ONE (\$44.99 DVD; Universal)

PARADE'S END (\$49.99 BluRay; HBO)

SPARTACUS: WAR OF THE DAMNED (\$59.99 BluRay; Starz/Anchor Bay)

BLANDINGS SERIES 1 (\$39.99 DVD; Acorn)

DA VINCI'S DEMONS (\$54.99 BluRay; Starz/Anchor Bay)

SINBAD COMPLETE FIRST SEASON (\$34.99 BluRay; BBC/Impossible)

REVOLUTION COMPLETE FIRST SEASON (\$69.99 BluRay; Warner Bros.) --

Like so many hit series, *The Office* overstayed its welcome. They filmed 201 episodes but the

show was never going to match the brilliance Ricky Gervais achieved in just 12 episodes and two holiday specials. Nonetheless, they did far better than I expected. After two seasons of struggle, they found their own voice thanks to a great cast led by Steve Carell. If only they'd called it a day after six seasons. Instead they trudged along for nine, even idiotically continuing when Carell bowed out. Why?

No one will confuse *Chicago Fire* with classic TV. But I love the consistent success of Dick Wolf. Here you have the week to week pleasures of *Law & Order* with a more soapy backdrop. There's enough of an ongoing story to avoid the crisis of the week feel of that old series *Emergency!* And boy are these some good-looking public servants. A nice diversion.

For my money, writer Ford Maddox Ford's masterpiece is *The Good Soldier*. But it's his series of novels about World War I dubbed *Parade's End* that has been twice turned into a miniseries, first in the 1960s and now again with Benedict Cumberbatch in the lead role. It was politely received on both sides of the Atlantic but has already seemed to fade a bit from memory. Still, if it brings more public attention to Ford -- whose works are often listed among the masterpieces of the 20th century -- then all the better.

The TV series *Spartacus* had the absurd idea to take the graphic novel silliness of the movie *300* and use that template for a TV show. Bizarrely, it worked. The show's visual boldness has often been overlooked because it was in the service of blood-splattered sex and violence. *Spartacus* also overcame the loss of its charismatic original lead due to illness. And now it's shown the good sense to barrel to a satisfying conclusion in just four

seasons. Well done.

Nothing will top Hugh Laurie and Stephen Fry as Jeeves and Wooster. But for those who can't get enough of PG Wodehouse and silly upper class twits, they might make do with *Blandings*, a BBC sitcom based on another long-running series of characters by the humorist. This is a bit broad, but Timothy Spall, Jennifer Saunders and especially Jack Farthing (a real find) as the dimwitted Freddie make it worth a look.

If you're a stickler for historical accuracy, run away. But if you just want silly entertainment, than *Da Vinci's Demons* might do the trick. It's stuff and nonsense nominally (VERY nominally) inspired by the life of Leonardo Da Vinci. On the plus side, it has Tom Riley as our hero, all sorts of naughtiness and political intrigue, with the occasional invention thrown in for good measure. On the down side, it really is rather ridiculous.

Sinbad is sort of a poor man's *Hercules* or *Xena*, if there can be such a thing. To enjoy *Da Vinci's Demons* you must turn your brain off. To enjoy *Sinbad*, you must throw it away.

Finally, there's *Revolution*, a new NBC drama. Like so many shows of the past few years, you feel like you have to start taking notes during the first episode just to follow everything that's going on. I'm happy to enjoy complex plotting, but it shouldn't feel like homework. Not for me.

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