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## Michael Giltz

Freelance writer and raconteur

Posted March 3, 2008 | 02:10 PM (EST)

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# DVDs: The Last *Last Emperor*



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I love the new Criterion edition of Bernardo Bertolucci's ode to Communism, *The Last Emperor* (\$59.95; Criterion). It contains sterling prints of the original and for those fanatics who want to see everything the much longer and less interesting TV version (which was wrongly labeled the "director's cut" for years when Bertolucci did NOT prefer it to the theatrical version), plus two more discs stuffed with documentaries running three and a half hours long.

Best of all, if you read this review and decide you want to rent or buy *The Last Emperor*, you can go anywhere and find it. Why do I say that? Because the worst new trend in DVDs is exclusivity. That means instead of making the DVD available wherever DVDs are sold, a studio strikes up an exclusive arrangement with some outlet, reducing the chances of someone stumbling onto a title and making it difficult even for fans of a particular release to know it's out and ready to be purchased.

Showtime had a critical success with *This American Life*, a six part TV version of the long-running radio hit by Ira Glass. The name alone probably has a high recognition factor that might prompt an impulse buy. Unfortunately, Showtime has arranged an exclusive deal to sell its TV shows at Borders. Go to Barnes & Noble or Wal-Mart or Best Buy or even Amazon.com and you'll have no idea that *This American Life* (\$19.99; Paramount) has been out on DVD for a few weeks. (And here's a wacky twist - Borders is partnered online with Amazon.com so if you go to Borders online you STILL won't realize *This American Life* is available.)

The same is true of *The Greatest Superstars of WrestleMania*, a two disc set celebrating Hulk Hogan and the like available only at Wal-Mart starting March 25 for \$29.95. If you want the engrossing Peter Bogdanovich documentary *Tom Petty & The Heartbreakers: Runnin' Down A Dream* (\$29.99; ) you have to somehow know it's only at Best Buy.

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So here's the thing. There's no shortage of articles dedicated to that certain je ne...
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Why would anyone agree to these exclusive arrangements? Casual fans who might have given a DVD a try will never know it's available. Even fans dying to buy a DVD will find it hard to track down a title. Are they supposed to magically know that a Showtime series can only be found at Borders? That would be like trying to remember that Simon & Schuster books can only be found at Barnes & Noble. (Not true, of course.) It is, quite simply, idiotic. Whatever promotional resources the stores devote to the title is far outweighed by the long-term stupidity of making your DVDs hard to find.

Also out this week: Sean Penn's acclaimed *Into The Wild* (\$35.98; Paramount). Me, I couldn't get past the fact that the kid died so unnecessarily when the movie painted him as a Christ-like figure who found ecstasy. But it was well-done with a great supporting cast (including a touching Hal Holbrook) and Emile Hirsch holds the screen wonderfully. It deserves a wider audience. Also, the similarly beautiful tale in a gorgeous setting *Khadak* (\$24.98; LifeSize); *Billy Wilder Film Collection* (\$39.98; MGM), the latest boxed set devoted to one of Hollywood's greats and if you don't already own *The Apartment* and *Some Like It Hot* plus the lesser *Kiss Me, Stupid* and *The Fortune Cookie*, then it's a great buy; *Super Bowl XLII Champions New York Giants* (\$24.98; Warner Bros.), an irresistible collection (at least to New Yorkers) of nearly three hours of footage from the season in general and the Super Bowl itself, though really it should be a two or three DVD set with the entire game included; *The Darjeeling Limited* (\$29.99; Fox), which was a huge step up from *The Life Aquatic* but bizarrely got lambasted by some critics for being yet another witty, intelligent comedy by director Wes Anderson with a great cast, quirky production design and oddball musical cues - really, why doesn't he pick boring musical cues and what's next, another western from John Ford?; *Beowulf Director's Cut* (\$29.99; Paramount), which proved that Angelina Jolie is still hot even when she's digitally animated - and hi-tech toys don't matter if the story is weak because director Robert Zemeckis made a much better movie 20 years ago with *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* and a lot less computer power at his disposal; *Flight 29 Down Season Two* (\$24.95; @DK) and *Flight 29: Hotel Tango Series Finale* (\$14.95; @DK), a pretty fun kid's version of *Lost* (without the supernatural elements) though the movie finale should have been included in season two; fans of *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* should soak up the anime *Blood+ Part One* (\$119.95; Sony), this more somber tale of a high school girl battling vampires that is beautifully shot and with a film worthy score by Hans Zimmer; New Line gets absorbed into Warner Bros. and says goodbye with one of its less successful projects, *Silk* (\$27.98; New Line), a period piece in which Michael Pitt is tempted to cheat on Keira Knightley - as if; Sidney Lumet's taut, wonderful jury room drama *12 Angry Men* (\$19.98; MGM); *The Smurfs Season One Volume One* (\$26.98; Warner Bros.), the smash pop cultural phenomenon that was so smurfalicious in its day; Chuck Norris may not have had the power to make Mike Huckabee President but he WILL make you buy *Walker: Texas Ranger - The Fourth Season* (\$49.99; Paramount); *America At War Megaset* (\$199.95; History), a fine if bulky 14 disc set about America's major wars, with the Civil War and World War II, for example, getting twice as much coverage as less fun wars like Korea, Vietnam and World War I (what was that about, again?); two sets proving there's a DVD for every interest - *The Art & Practice of Gardening* (\$24.99; Kultur) and *Simply Painting Watercolors Vol. 1: The Northeast* (\$29.99; Kultur) with the amiable Frank Clarke; *Newhart Complete First Season* (\$39.98; Fox) and I'm already anticipating that final episode, arguably the best in TV history; *The Love Boat Season One Volume One* (\$36.98; Paramount), is - to be kind -- a time capsule of cheesy Saturday night TV escapism that would go down a lot more smoothly if it contained the TV movie that launched the show and the entire first season instead of just 12 episodes; *Family Affair Season Five* (\$39.98; MPI), which proves that sincerity and sweetness can sometimes age better than cutting edge humor; *The Hogfather* (\$14.95; Genius), a TV movie adaptation of one of the comic sci-fi Discworld novels by Terry Pratchett (think Monty Python, Douglas Adams, et al) that does a pretty good job for those who've read some of the books and will be deeply, deeply puzzling to those who haven't but might just make them realize they're missing something amusing and pick up a book of his; and finally *Comanche Moon* (\$29.95; Sony), an ok prequel to *Lonesome Dove* as long as you enjoy it on its own merits (Steve Zahn is very good, in particular) and it's been a while since you watched the original, one of the best and most popular Westerns of all time.

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Everytime someone tries to be clever about distribution - like such exclusive deals you mention, this gives pirates a huge incentive to make the movie available to all. I live in Amman which is flooded with pirated stores selling DVDs of everything for under \$1.5. It's wild! I can find a DVD for a movie that's just out in a US theatre at the same time! At one point in the past, this was painful. But then I thought, well if these movies aren't easily available to people here, then that's an open invitation for piracy! I blogged this last year: <http://naydynmoody.blogspot.com/2007/09/avc-is-missing-another-c.html>

Movies are made to be seen. Distributors have been extremely frustrating, uncreative and lethargic. So if the only way for someone in Jordan to find/watch a movie of choice is thru a local store selling pirated material, then that's what they're going to do! And I know it's wrong, but what choice is one left with?? internet penetration in Jordan is a mere 14%, so only a handful of people shop online. The rest can't afford the \$30+ original DVD even if it is available.

Making things inaccessible simply encourages people who want it to seek alternative ways to obtain it. Distribution and pricing needs a whole new structure!

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[Michael Giltz](#) [See Profile](#) [I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz](#) [permalink](#)

You make a good point about availability -- and it's not just around the world. When record labels literally killed the single, people turned to illegal downloads available online until iTunes rescued the music industry's butt in that category. However, as far as new movies are concerned, I would defend the studios a little. Increasingly, big blockbuster movies are opened worldwide as quickly as possible, virtually day and date. And it's not just Indiana Jones but darn near every big would-be blockbuster like Iron Man, Horton Hears A Who.

chemical used in rocket fuel were found in samples of...

Plus they rush out the DVD generally within 12 weeks of a movie's release in the theater. The wages of people in Jordan is beyond them, of course, but they do try to blanket the globe as quickly as possible. And that's a direct response to piracy -- they know they can't stop it so they try to make the theatrical experience as widely available as soon as they can.

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GeorgeKaplan See Profile I'm a Fan of GeorgeKaplan permalink

This is what I do!

http://www.amazon.com/Last-Emperor-Criterion-Collection/dp/B000ZM1MIW/ref=sr\_1\_1?ie=UTF8&s=dvd&qid=1204655435&sr=1-1

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Michael Giltz See Profile I'm a Fan of Michael Giltz permalink

I didn't buy the Eagles album for the same reason. Not so many Wal-marts in Manhattan. You're right to point out the financial incentives but it so SEVERELY limits the upside that it makes no sense to me - especially if you see DVD sales and rentals as not just a means to themselves but as a way to promote the show so that season two will do better. Heck, just SEEING This American Life on the shelves let's people know about the series on Showtime. It's like a mini-ad and they're giving all that up to foolishly hedge their bets. New Line hedged its bets on The Golden Compass by selling off the foreign rights even though a fantasy spectacle like that was certain to do at least as well as the US and often much more. Now the heads of New Line are out of a job. They probably still would be, but at least they wouldn't look so dumb on their last big decision. As for Amazon, if you mean lower prices for singles, that's something the labels wanted iTunes to do but they resisted mightily multi-layered pricing. (Mostly for the intelligent reason that labels wanted to charge more for hot new singles not really just lower prices on much older songs.) So I don't think Amazon got a better deal so much as agreed to aggressively different pricing for different songs/albums. But I may be wrong.

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dannyo152 See Profile I'm a Fan of dannyo152 permalink

The thing about these exclusive retailer deals (last year there was an Eagles album that didn't get my dollars because they made it too difficult to buy) is that they they take a fee for the exclusivity, which hedges the downside and in return they limit the upside. I don't get it either. But then I'm sure it takes an MBA and a spreadsheet to understand much the record companies do. As an example, giving Amazon a better deal so as to punish Apple for successfully selling their stuff.

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