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DVDs: Second Thoughts

Posted April 14, 2008 | 03:36 PM (EST)



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One of the great pleasures of DVD is being able to watch movies (or just scenes) again and again. You don't have to wait for a revival of plunge into a dim memory from seeing a film even ten months ago -- you can just pop in a disc and watch it again. This leads, of course, to wholesale revisionist thinking: "that wasn't as good as people said," "this movie is great and everyone else is an idiot," and the ever-popular "it's even better the second time" are common reactions.

Here are some current releases that will surely prompt second thoughts.

There Will Be Blood Special Edition (\$34.99; Paramount) -- It's even better the second time! Seriously, although the film was on my list of the best films of 2008, it's one of those movies that a second viewing seems to click into place even more completely. Everything is so assured and the problems I had (like most, I found the coda a bit awkward) are less severe or gone. Obviously, director Paul Thomas Anderson is a disciple of Stanley Kubrick, right down to the brilliant use of pre-existing music by Jonny Greenwood. And not even endless TV ads featuring his meltdown ("I ABANDONED MY CHILD!") can diminish the subtle brilliance of Daniel Day-Lewis.

Juno (\$29.98; Fox) -- This smart comedy is almost certainly set up for a whipping by home viewers who will wonder what all the fuss was about. It was such a big hit in theaters that people invariably want to take a comedy like this down a notch. Besides, comedies always play better in theaters with a crowd of people instead of at home alone. Doesn't change the fact that Ellen Page is a charmer here, even if it's annoying that everyone (not just her) speaks in the same hyper-articulate witty manner. By the way, it's also available in a two-disc edition for \$34.98 with a free digital download and a \$39.98 Blu-Ray Edition. Are people really going to spend an extra \$5 or \$10 on Blu-Ray, especially for a comedy like this? If they want Blu-Ray to catch on, they better make it the same price as regular DVD, pronto.

Walk Hard (\$28.95; Columbia) -- This spoof of music bio-pics will get the opposite treatment of

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Juno. It was so thoroughly dismissed at the box office that people renting and buying it will be pleasantly surprised to find it pretty darn funny and talk it up to their friends. I bet it doubles the dreadful \$18 million it grossed at the box office and is dubbed a "cult classic" in the blink of an eye. Also available in a Special Edition for \$29.96 and on Blu-Ray for \$43.95. With the special edition only \$1 more, why even make the standard edition available? And again, is Blu-Ray worth \$14 more, even if it does look great? At the beginning of a recession, this is no time to hope you can jack up DVD prices by a third and have everyone buy Blu-Ray. Not gonna happen.

The Adventures of Baron Munchausen (\$19.94; Columbia) -- A charming confection by Terry Gilliam that can and should gain a new audience. Plus the fantastical tales inspire some of his most fantastical effects. Will pure digital effects ever contain the charm and whimsy of stop-motion, trick perspective, hand-built contraptions and other classic effects dating back to the theater? Not yet, and maybe not ever. A fun 72 minute documentary lovingly details the trauma and turmoil that seem to dog every Gilliam film. (Truly, he must have been a very bad man in a previous life to have awful luck stalk him so relentlessly.) Also in Blu-Ray and here's a movie where it's really worth it.

Lars and the Real Girl (\$27.98; MGM) - And here's a gem about a small town loner (Ryan Gosling) falling in love with a blow-up doll. Not the wacky comedy that sounds like but a sweet, gentle story told with great empathy. People won't be having second thoughts about this one: they've barely heard of it, so this will be an undiscovered gem. The second thoughts will come ten or twenty years from now when *Lars and the Real Girl* is touted as one of the best movies of 2007 long after more popular flicks have faded from memory.

Also out this week: *Houdini: The Movie Star* (\$39.95; Kino) a thorough and fascinating glimpse at Houdini's career onscreen though he wasn't much of a presense and the best finds here are newsreel footage of Houdini doing his escapes in cities around the country; *The 11th Hour* (\$4.99; Warner Bros), yep, \$5 because producer and narrator Leonardo DiCaprio clearly wants to get the word out about environmental dangers and what steps you can take to combat them; *Blast of Silence* (\$29.95; Criterion), a 1961 noir I'd never heard of about a hit man in NYC during the holidays to do a job that's so hard-boiled it's a little soft, but which has great camerawork and nifty glimpses of the city around 1960; *Manda Bala* (\$26.98; City Lights), a stylish provocative documentary about violence in Brazil; *Lions for Lambs* (\$29.99; United Artists/MGM), and anyone who thinks Hollywood is liberal should watch this Robert Redford film about Iraq where the conservative senator (Tom Cruise) mops the floor with a wishy-washy journalist (Meryl Streep); *The Bette Davis Collection* (\$49.98; Fox), a great bargain of five movies, especially if you don't already own the essential *All About Eve*; *Meerkat Manor Season Two* (\$24.95; Genius), the surprisingly compelling nature series -- perfect if you want your kids to get an early jump on vicious office politics; *Mannequin/Mannequin 2: On The Move* (\$14.98; MGM), an Andrew McCarthy romantic comedy that I reviewed in college, could barely endure sitting through and then watched in astonishment as it became a word of mouth hit that surprised everyone involved with it almost as much as me, teaching me forever that when it comes to what will be a hit, no one really ever knows; *Tilt: The Battle To Save Pinball* (\$29.95; C3 Images), a bare-bones documentary that tells the intriguing story of pinball's demise and how a group of brilliant designers almost rescued it with the innovative Pinball 2000 (till *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace*, among other factors, helped to kill it), with loads of extras pinball fanatics will enjoy; *A Shot Of Love First Season* (\$39.98; Paramount) and *Rock Of Love First Season* (\$34.98; Anchor Bay), which collectively prove that MTV and VH1 have virtually nothing to do with music anymore but are fine if you like this sort of reality show bread and circus-type stuff; *Wardance* (\$27.98; ThinkFilm), a documentary about people in war-ravaged Uganda finding release in music -- think of it as a double bill with the current indie *The Visitor*; *Fortysomething* (\$39.99; Acorn), further proof that Hugh Laurie can do much more than the acerbic Dr. House, if you haven't already seen *Jeeves & Wooster*, *Fry & Laurie* and his other efforts; *Boston Celtics 1985-1986 NBA Championship* (\$49.98; Warner Bros.), as a New Yorker and Yankee fan, far be it from me to bring attention to Boston but the Knicks are so hapless and this is so far in the past it seems churlish not to celebrate the amazing achievement of Boston's 16 NBA Championships thanks to the likes of Larry Bird; *The Final Season* (\$26.96; Sony), which is diverting if -- like me -- you love baseball and any sports movie with Rudy, I mean Sam Gamgee, I mean Sean Astin; *Def Poetry 6* (\$19.96; HBO), the long-running Russell Simmons' showcase for rising talents and superstars in the spoken word world; *Perry Mason 50th Anniversary Edition* (\$39.99; Paramount), pretty much everything the casual fan needs, including 12 classic episodes, a later movie of the week and loads of extras about the lawyer who could browbeat the most hardened criminal into a confession by the end of an episode.

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So, any movies you've had second thoughts on lately -- something you downgraded or upgraded dramatically after watching it a second time? And are you going to buy some, all or none of your DVDs on Blu-Ray now that the format war is over?

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I definitely enjoyed Lions for Lambs and the punch line will be ingrained in grainy detail in my synapses for a long, long, time. This is one movie where the fade to black where the main protagonist is still trying to make up his mind what to do really works. It is a call to action for all of us to wake up to our minds and do something positive and at the same time it is also a warning that any well meaning volunteer can be used by the military and then lost as a casualty.

No, I like the "club" arrangement at the video store where you can rent as many as you want for a set monthly fee. It's much more fun than cluttering up the house with DVDs. You fill up one closet and start on another and then you think, "Why am I stock piling DVDs?" No reason I can think of.

We should all be stock piling food right now.

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"We should all be stockpiling food." LOL. And yet, true.

As for renting versus owning, I'm afraid I'm an inveterate collector. If I read a book and enjoy it, I'd hate giving it back to the library. CDs of course you listen to again and again or want a particular track for a mixtape. (I wonder when "mixtape" will become archaic, if it's not already?) And DVDs are a library and resource. I can pretend it's because I write about entertainment and need them for when I might interview a writer or actor or director. But the truth is that even if I never wrote another word, I'd want my favorite movies and TV shows on the shelf to reflect who I am and what I love.

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"At the beginning of a recession, this is no time to hope you can jack up DVD prices by a third and have everyone buy Blu-Ray. Not gonna happen."

Not only that but Blu-Ray disc players, themselves, are unlikely to be on the short list of people that need to take out a bank loan to buy gas for their cars. So now that Sony has the market share it's time for the reality that ALWAYS sets in eventually with tech items; make the players financially accessible (you know you can, Sony) and the discs reasonable and the wheels will turn.

It's always the same old song and dance as new technology companies have to squeeze as much milk out of folks unwilling to wait before the inevitable price drop occurs and the company makes even more money than their already making.

I'm an avowed tech nutball but the thought of Blu-Ray is so far off my radar as to be almost non-existent. That's life in these nasty economic times.

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Even in good times, the standard DVD was such a vast improvement over VHS that the step up to Blu-Ray (while clearly substantial) just isn't a game changer. There is NO WAY people are going to re-buy all the movies they own on DVD for Blu-Ray, even if the price were the same. For some movies, people might prefer Blu-ray for new purchases (eg, Indiana Jones and the Crystal Skull when it comes out on DVD) but for most of them, it's not worth an extra \$8 or \$10. Plus you have to buy a hi-def tv and a new player to get the benefits, whereas to go from VHS to DVD you just had to buy a player that cost maybe \$300 at most and now less than \$100. The manufacturers should recognize Blu-Ray as an improvement that will maybe keep people buying DVDs at the current, lowered level of \$18 bil a year (if they lower the price to be the same as standard DVDs) which is still a huge business delivering twice the total people spend at the box office and hope it keeps them happy for the next ten years.

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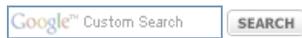
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