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Some lovely, under-appreciated animated features, two classic documentaries that Roger Ebert loved and the exhausting finale to what was once the highly anticipated Hobbit movies.

**THE HOBBIT: THE BATTLE OF THE FIVE ARMIES** (\$44.95 BluRay combo; Warner Home Video)  
**EXODUS: GODS AND KINGS** (\$49.99 3-D BluRay Deluxe; Fox)

Two lumbering epics. Exodus: Gods and Kings is not really a disappointment since director Ridley Scott has seemed lost for many years now. Unlike online flammers, I don't have an issue with the film's approach to the religious aspect of the story. It's just a whole lot of fuss and feels exactly like a Fox "epic" from the 1960s, which is a horrible insult. Some of the big spectacle moments are satisfying and Christian Bale is an imposing hero. But the campy yet sincere Charlton Heston The Ten Commandments remains more satisfying on every level.

The final Hobbit movie brings a sad end to what should have been a triumph. Director Peter Jackson was brilliant on The Lord Of The Rings, one of the great film fantasies of all time. It was essentially right in tune with the material from start to finish and a remarkable accomplishment. His initial instinct to avoid trying to duplicate/top that experience with The Hobbit was the right one. Everything about this whole venture has been disastrous on a Phantom Menace level. The first film was shockingly bad on a dramatic level. The second was somewhat proficient but anonymously so, with almost none of the actual spirit of either the book itself or the more mature, darker vision of Middle Earth that flowered in The Lord Of The Rings (both film and book). The focus on technology -- again, just like Phantom Menace -- turned the triumphant craft work of LOTR into digital disaster with scenes looking like video games. Now we have the finale. The tone of the book is very different, much more picaresque than the adult LOTR, but it climaxes with a remarkably mature turn of events led by Bilbo Baggins that is deeply moving. It may be for kids, but the price paid emotionally is genuine and pretty amazing in context. Well, Martin Freeman was wonderful casting but the film is so determined to lead up to LOTR that it's far more worried about the grand battles than the grand bargain Bilbo makes to achieve peace. Moments work here, unlike either of the other two films. And as always with Jackson the extras are plentiful and top-notch. But what a dreadful waste of talent from all involved.

**TOP FIVE** (\$39.99 BluRay combo; Paramount)

It's not enough to say this is Chris Rock's best movie. That is faint praise given his track record. Rock's real success has been as a stand-up comic and the sweet, but sharp TV show Everybody Hates Chris which successfully mined his childhood and launched a clutch of talented actors. So Top Five is better than all the other bad live action movies he has appeared in. But it's actually good good -- a paean to Woody Allen, a romantic comedy, a savvy look at the life of a stand-up and pretty darn funny. It's not great great, just good good. But as writer and director and star, Rock finally got the chance to show his stuff and hint that he may just have theatrical greatness in him.

**MR. BEAN: THE WHOLE BEAN** (\$24.97 DVD; Shout! Factory)  
**FIREBALL XL5: THE COMPLETE SERIES** (\$29.93 DVD; Shout! Factory)

Well, let's not compare Rowan Atkinson's Mr. Bean to actual silent film greats like Laurel & Hardy or god forbid Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, et al. But just as Jacques Tati's movies delighted simply for being silent comedies in an era when silent comedies were all but extinct, Atkinson's trouble-prone Bean was a breath of fresh air in the early 1990s when he first appeared. Like Westerns -- welcome just for being Westerns when they've been off screen for a long time -- the pratfall antics of Bean felt like a revelation. And not surprisingly they played well all over the world since dialogue is not an issue. This set remasters all 14 episodes of the original run. Someday they'll slap together all the movies, the animated series and these episodes, but this is plenty for casual fans.

Hardcore devotees of the supermarionation technique devised by Gerry Anderson are surely the only ones who will be eagerly awaiting the complete series Fireball XL5. If you haven't seen Thunderbirds, that's clearly the place to start. But just as Mr. Bean is so delightful for being a new stab at silent comedy, the retro joy of Anderson's work is seeing puppetry used to bring life to sci-fi spectacles and elaborate action scenes, strings and all. It's not cheaply done or klutzy, but accomplished with love. It's just as enjoyable as plopping down in a public park and watching a performer enact Punch & Judy. In other words, the joy of performing and bringing a story to life is far more important than the style used to tell that story. That's why Star Wars will endure and the "superior" digital effects of Phantom Menace et al pale quickly. Here you've got adventures in space as Earth colonizes the stars. It needs an action team to fight danger, stage rescues and the like -- hence, Fireball XL5. What might surprise parents is how quickly little kids will embrace the storytelling even though they should reject it as "fake" looking.

**GATES OF HEAVEN/VERNON, FLORIDA** (\$39.95 BluRay; Criterion)

**JOHN FORD: DREAMING THE QUIET MAN** (\$29.95 BluRay; Olive Films)

**OPEN SESAME: THE STORY OF SEEDS** (\$24.98 DVD; Disinformation Company)

Whenever I watch the early masterpieces of filmmaker Errol Morris, I can't help thinking of Roger Ebert and Gene Siskel. They championed Morris and rightly so since he's proven one of the most influential documentary filmmakers in history. His first two gems are collected by Criterion in a package that is not as extras heavy as some of their other sets. It's welcome nonetheless for enshrining these movies in excellent prints and bringing them to the attention of movie lovers everywhere. Morris would go on to make formally beautiful movies like *The Thin Blue Line*. Here his resources are more modest but what he accomplishes on a shoe string is remarkable. *Gates Of Heaven* is about a pet cemetery; *Vernon, Florida* is about a small town seemingly populated with more than its fair share of kooks. Both movies are warmly fascinated by the odd ducks that populate them and tell the stories of these people with open-minded curiosity. If one had the sense that Morris ever felt superior to the folk discussing elaborate funeral plots for their beloved pets or the trailer park folk and their odd obsessions, the movies would become unpleasant. But Morris is fascinated and delighted and genuinely interested in letting these people reveal themselves in all their eccentric beauty. I'll simply never forget the person in *Vernon* who has a jar of sand they collected, sand that grows. (Huh? Watch it.) Essential viewing.

St. Patrick's Day has passed and if you're any sort of cinephile and Irish lover, you watched John Ford's romantic classic *The Quiet Man*. Anyone who thinks John Wayne can't act should watch his young action hero in *Stagecoach* followed by his bitterly racist anti-hero in *The Searchers* followed by his broodingly quiet but very funny and romantic turn in *The Quiet Man*. And once you've done that you'll be a fan for life of the gorgeous Irish countryside, the gorgeous Maureen O'Hara and even Wayne himself. After that, you'll want to learn more. It's a shame this new documentary narrated by Gabriel Byrne isn't included in an elaborate BluRay presentation of the film but it's definitely worth watching for anyone who has devoured that delightful film time and again. I had no idea it took Ford 20 years to make this movie, which was based on a short story first published in *Saturday Evening Post*. It seems so delightfully commercial and broadly appealing you'd think studios would be lined up to make it. This documentary tells how that wasn't so, about the western Ford and Wayne and O'Hara had to make just to get this film off the ground and the impact *The Quiet Man* had on other filmmakers like Martin

Scorsese. And who knew that insanely catchy central theme was written by a cop? It doesn't get more Irish than that.

Open Sesame: The Story Of Seeds is truly guerrilla filmmaking: it's a passionate labor of love about seeds, their essential role in our food system and how that role is threatened. Watch it and you'll learn about the devastating impact of various patents that have turned seeds from a self-propagating resource into a commodity that must be purchased over and over. (Many commercially manufactured seeds are now designed NOT to provide fertile seeds from a crop that could be planted the following year. Thus you have to go back to the big agra combine to buy your seeds every single year.) Other dangers include a dangerous emphasis on massive planting of monocrops, the same plantings with the same genetic code over and over again, which means any successful attack on that crop can have devastating effects. (Varied seeds with varied genetics as well as the planting of varied crops all can mitigate that vulnerability.) It also deals with GMO but the film is not focused on that one aspect since the story and survival of seeds goes far beyond that one issue.

**INTO THE WOODS** (\$39.99 BluRay combo; Disney)

**THE SOUND OF MUSIC 50TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION** (\$49.99 BluRay; Fox)

Do I love musicals? Yes, I do. And yet I approached the feature film Into The Woods with timidity. I'm crazy about the Stephen Sondheim stage production (though I've never seen a truly great production of it). Yet there's something inherently...theatrical about it. It just doesn't make sense to me as a feature film where all the fairy tale aspects would become literal rather than delightfully imaginary as in a Broadway house. Indeed, that seems to be the fatal flaw in the film. Someone else might have found a better, more distinctive way of tackling this story about what happens after "happily ever after," but I doubt it would have worked much better. Yes, elaborate effects and big stars crammed into every role was the least imaginative way to go. But some musicals are not meant to be movies and I'm pretty sure this is one of them. Everything feels too literal here, whereas on stage it's lighter than air and the poignancy of everyone from our hero to the Witch feels universal and deeply moving. Still, it's coming out the day after James Corden made his late night debut on TV and he does quite nicely here. So it's a good week for him, at least.

Of course, some stage musicals were destined to be films. Surely that's the case with Rodgers & Hammerstein's most successful property, The Sound Of Music. It's the least complicated of their major musicals but it works like a charm on film, whereas most of their other stage plays were entombed in godawful features that denuded them of the complex, adult concerns that made the stage plays so much more than just tuneful family entertainment. But family entertainment, indeed light operetta is exactly what's on tap here, even though the film adroitly improves on the stage production in numerous ways. It doesn't blink from showing the way the Austrians collaborated with and even welcomed the Nazis at every level of society, from the aristocracy (VonTrapp's fiance) to the middle class (his best friend Max) to the workers (his servants and the delivery boy Rolf). Captain Von Trapp is very much alone in his disdain for the Fuhrer. (That's why Austria never even staged the musical until 2006 and they tried to show the movie by chopping off the final third and stopping at the wedding scene.) You don't remember that really, of course, because what dominates the memory is a score brimming with classic tunes and Julie Andrews simply radiating goodness as Maria. Memorable villains are a piece of cake, by the way. Creating memorable, genuinely nice people is nigh on impossible but Andrews accomplishes exactly that. And she sings like an angel. If you own the 45th anniversary edition, there's no need to upgrade. If you don't, the BluRay is lovely.

**SONG OF THE SEA** (\$34.98 BluRay; Universal)

**THE TALE OF THE PRINCESS KAGUYA** (\$34.98 BluRay; Universal)

The big shock when this year's Oscar nominations were announced was the cold shoulder for The Lego Movie, one of the most successful and acclaimed films of the year. People foolishly blamed two of the movies they had never heard of that were nominated. I blame the inclusion of the very inferior movie The Boxtrolls. It was a

technically challenging film from a company that has done wonderful work, but this wasn't a creatively satisfying film according to virtually everyone. But most everyone else said, hey, what's Song Of The Sea and The Tale Of The Princess Kaguya? Never heard of 'em! Well, Song is from the people behind The Secret Of Kells and uses an Irish folk tale to create a visually striking new film. Princess Kaguya is an even more gorgeous work from Studio Ghibli, the source for animation master Miyazaki. This fable proves the artisans that crafted his many masterpieces will be carrying on the tradition of excellent film work for years to come. Watch these and you won't be complaining about why they were included; you'll be complaining that they should have won over the middling effort Big Hero Six.

**RIDE THE PINK HORSE** (\$39.95 BluRay; Criterion)

**THE SURE THING** (\$24.97 BluRay; Shout! Factory)

**THE LADY FROM SHANGHAI** (\$14.98 BluRay; Mill Creek)

**VINCENT & THEO** (\$29.95 BluRay; Olive)

**THE WILD ONE** (\$14.98 BluRay; Mill Creek)

**THE BREAKFAST CLUB 30TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION** (\$19.98 BluRay; Universal)

Robert Montgomery is a fascinating figure in Hollywood, both staunchly conservative and a bit of rebel thanks to going it alone to pursue his own projects after years in the studio system. He made a string of good to great movies, served as a pioneer in grooming politicians to make the most of their visual image via TV and the like (he served as an image consultant for President Eisenhower), fought corruption, hated commies and like any man's man, genuinely put himself in harm's way during World War II, ultimately winning the Bronze Star. He enjoyed big success as a producer in TV, where Robert Montgomery Presents was a big hit. His directorial efforts were less acclaimed but Montgomery hit a high water mark with the offbeat noir Ride A Pink Horse. (Even the title is offbeat!) It's given loving treatment from Criterion but this is no lost classic. It's a solid if second tier noir but with enough interest to make it worth your time. It's the sort of release that reminds you that the folk at Criterion are people with their own quirky favorites and not just turning out the obvious big classics, like those AFI lists of the 100 Best Comedies that are depressingly middle brow.

John Cusack just switched some of his behind the scenes team and I couldn't be happier. A terrific actor, Cusack has lost a step or two commercially and artistically. While he's always working and always making money, he's not building on the great early work of his career, at least not consistently. Here's hoping he gets back on track and can make new films as fresh and distinctive as The Sure Thing. An early triumph for Rob Reiner, it's a classic road movie with Cusack and Daphne Zuniga battling every step of the way as college students headed cross country. She's meeting her boyfriend/husband-to-be while he's hooking up with a sure thing. It's a genuine delight. "Make love in a hammock!" is always good advice. Watch it and remind yourself how good he can be.

It's another peak moment for fans of Orson Welles. A beautifully restored print of Chimes Of Midnight is on its way. A new book - Orson Welles's Last Movie -- tells the wild, hard to believe story of the making and unmaking of his still unseen final work The Other Side Of The Wind. And here is a gorgeous new BluRay print of his noir-ish The Lady From Shanghai. Not peak Welles but it has peak moments including a justly famous climax. This print looks just smashing.

Director Robert Altman was alone and all but forgotten during his years in the wilderness after the collapse of Popeye and before his comeback. He made modest, un-Altmanesque movies on a dime. But for my money they're proud additions to his body of work and only add lustre to his legacy. Secret Honor is a compelling one-man show for Philip Baker Hall as Nixon. Streamers is a tight and nicely done adaptation of the stage play. And Vincent & Theo is an excellent example of that awful sub-genre: the film about a great artist. Often deadly dull, but this one is vibrant and alive, with excellent work by Tim Roth as Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Rhys as his much put-upon brother. It's raw and passionate and exciting. No wonder his next film would be The Player.

The biker movie *The Wild One* was a sensation when it came out. Now it's a curio, reduced to that one great bit of dialogue ("What are you rebelling against?" "Whatta ya got?") and of course Brando. Marlon Brando makes it worth a look and this is a fine print. But the film is hopelessly dated despite his best effort.

*The Breakfast Club* is also dated, I must admit. A big favorite of mine on its release, the film was rightly dubbed *The Little Chill* while in production. Indeed, just like *The Big Chill*, it has remarkable casting (Jackie Burch did the honors) and scenes that imprinted themselves on a generation. Sure, it's blame the parents attitude felt a little easy even then but it took its teenager heroes seriously, something you usually had to watch French films to see. But it holds up as a showcase for the great cast and as a time capsule for an era when young people at the center of a film felt like a novelty.

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