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DVDs: Tintin Can't Defeat Creepy Motion-Capture Animation Style

Posted: 03/30/2012 3:29 pm

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The Adventures of Tintin (\$44.99 BluRay combo; Paramount) -- I'll be forever confused by the fact that two of the savviest, smartest directors in Hollywood oversaw the Tintin feature film -- a life-long dream of so many fans of the Herge stories - and yet neither one of them took a look at the tests or rough footage and said, "Hold it, hold it! This looks weird." Clearly motion-capture technology has its place. It worked in the semi-realistic world of *Avatar* (it helps if most of your characters have cat eyes). It worked to allow Andy Serkis to deliver brilliant performances in both *Rise Of The Planet Of The Apes* and *The*

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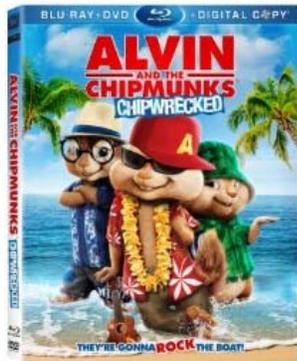


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Lord Of The Rings (an ape and a Gollum mixed in with live actors and all sorts of other special effects). But when the film is fully animated as in *The Polar Express* and *The Adventures Of Tintin*, the weird look of it -- not quite live action, not quite animated -- and the dead eyes of the characters is genuinely ugly. It's like stop-motion animation with none of the charm, animation with none of the freedom and beauty, computer animation with none of the sharpness. It's neither fish nor fowl and it's hard to understand why Steven Spielberg and Peter Jackson couldn't see that. I think either a live action film or classic hand-drawn animation to harken back to the original illustrations would have been the way to go. In any case, the script needed more work. Tintin is all about pell-mell adventure but the rather bland hero could use some fleshing out, in every sense of the word. Serkis has some fun as Haddock but it's unimpressive visually or as an adventure, though tiny kids might be captivated. Better to read them the books.



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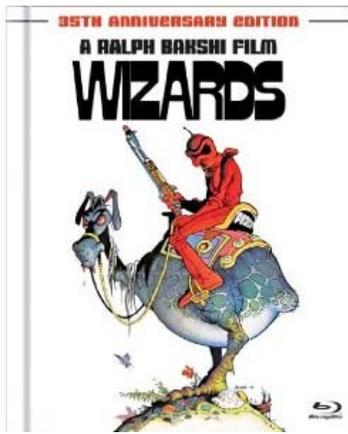
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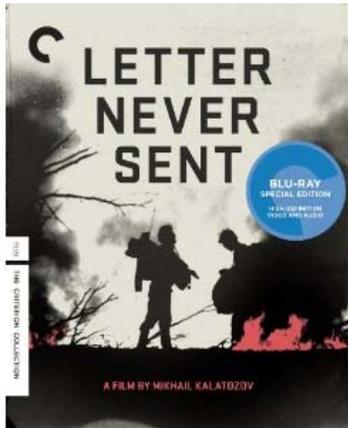


Happy Feet Two (\$35.99 BluRay combo; Warner Bros.)

Alvin and the Chipmunks: Chipwrecked (\$39.99 BluRay combo; Fox)

Hop (\$39.98 BluRay combo; Universal)

Wizards (\$34.99 BluRay; Fox) -- As *Tintin* proves, animation ain't easy. Here are four more examples of that. George Miller is one of the boldest, most interesting directors working today. His foray into animation seemed unlikely but *Happy Feet* was a massive surprise hit. The sequel did a disastrous one-third of the business and was probably one-third as charming as the modest original. Perhaps the biggest factor is that no sequel was needed. Alvin and the gang are back (happily with Jason Lee back on board) in *Chipwrecked*. The title isn't nearly as clever as *The Squeakquel*, by the way, and unless you're very young, the hijinks on tap pale quickly. Mind you, it's genius compared to *Hop*, an almost indifferently made flick starring James Marsden. I don't know why Christmas inspires such great movies and Easter is a flop, but there you are. Finally, I feel bad saying anything bad about the pioneer Ralph Bakshi, whose work the rest of Hollywood still hasn't caught up with. Animation can do so much more than tell fairy tales or family friendly Pixar fare. But *Wizards* was made for pennies and it shows; you have to really be into his simple tale of good vs evil in a post-apocalyptic future to handle the rough-edged work offered here. Rotoscoping was obviously a precursor to motion-capture and Bakshi always pushed the envelope in terms of story and content. The best elements are the making-of comments by Bakshi himself.



Letter Never Sent (\$29.95 BluRay; Criterion) -- The Soviet director Mikhail Kalatozov made a string of remarkable films I'm just catching up with. *I Am Cuba* is the best known -- it's a visually dazzling travelogue. But I was truly blown away by *The Cranes Are Flying*, one of the greatest works of cinematic history. It tells the story of lovers torn apart by World War II and like *I Am Cuba* is show-stoppingly beautiful in its imagery but in *Cranes* that camerawork is geared towards telling an emotionally gripping story. *Letter Never Sent* falls in the middle and is nearly as great. In it, four geologists are trekking through Siberia looking for traces of diamonds that scientists say are likely there. It's backbreaking work and it doesn't help that the only woman on the trip (the Bjork-like Tatyana Samojlova) is dating one man and deeply desired by another. Forest fires prove an even greater threat as the film becomes an adventure story of humans versus nature a la *Never Cry Wolf*. The camerawork is again stunning -- courtesy of the great, great Sergei Urusevsky, the talent behind all three films. Sometimes his imagery has the power of political iconography, such as the scene where they're hacking away at the earth and the team looks like Soviet strength personified. Other times it's keyed to the human element. But it's always jaw-dropping. Start with *The Cranes Are Flying* (also on Criterion) but anyone who loves this sort of tale or fans of great cinematography should jump.



Todd Akin

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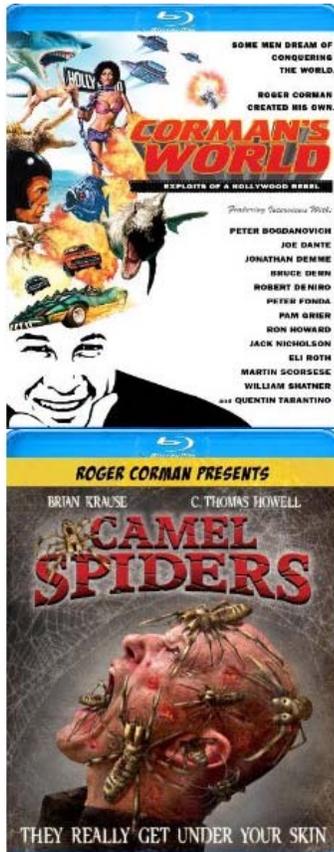


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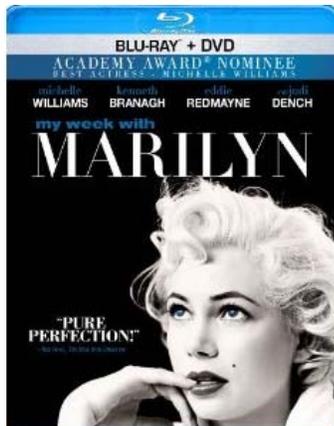
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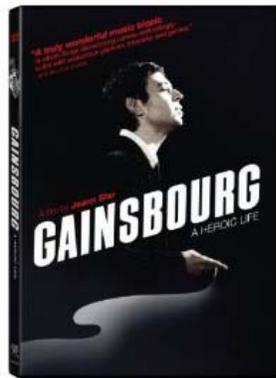
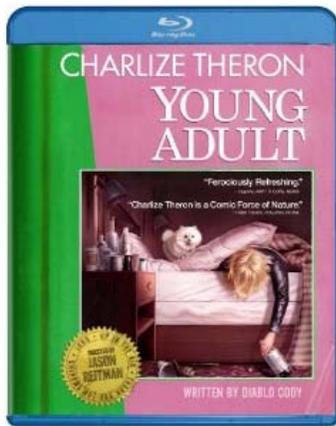
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Corman's World: Exploits of a Hollywood Rebel (\$29.99 BluRay; Anchor Bay)

Camel Spiders (\$24.99 BluRay; Anchor Bay) -- A documentary like *Corman's World* seems like the easiest thing imaginable to pull off. Heck, who wouldn't have a great story to tell about legendary B movie producer Roger Corman, who gave seemingly everyone in Hollywood a break and let them pay for the privilege of it. Still, it can be so easy that people get lazy whereas this fun endeavor does what you would want. The names are here, such as Martin Scorsese and Peter Fonda to Joe Dante and William Shatner. I'll bet Corman could have made it for less money, however. And he's still at it: witness *Camel Spiders*, a B movie with a goofy premise (giant camel spiders), a happy obliviousness to logic (the poster features a web because when you hear "spider" you think of webs, never mind that camel spiders don't spin webs) and it stars an actor either on their way up or on their way down (hi, C. Thomas Howell!). It's dumb, it's stupid and people keep watching and Corman keeps laughing.



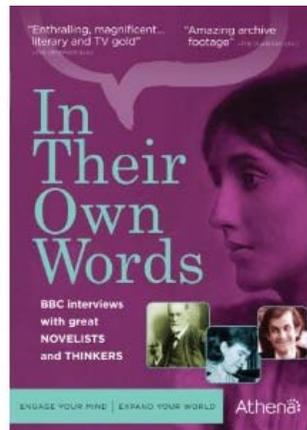


My Week With Marilyn (\$39.99 BluRay combo; Anchor Bay)

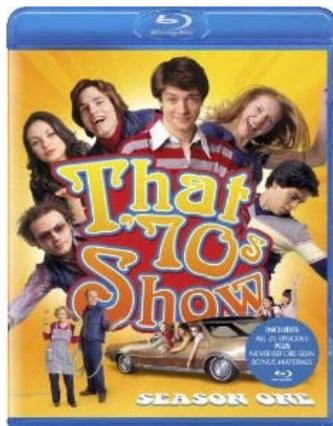
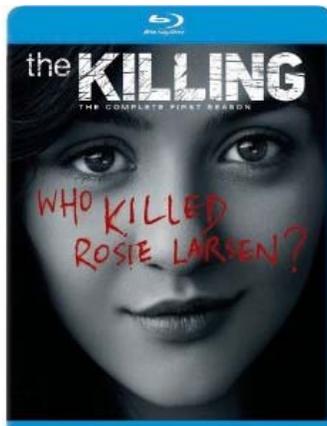
Young Adult (\$39.99 BluRay; Paramount)

The Myth of the American Sleepover (\$24.98; Sundance Selects/MPI)

Gainsbourg (\$34.95; Music Box) -- Women dominate these films. The best Michelle Williams to come out in 2011 was *Meek's Cutoff*. But I was not expecting her to create such a full character out of Marilyn Monroe. The movie is a trifle (and should be called *My Month With Marilyn*), but Williams avoids imitation and gets to the heart of what might have made this sex-bomb/ambitious actress so beguiling. Is screenwriter Diablo Cody's time in the spotlight passing? That's the fear that drives *Young Adult*, in which a prom queen (Charlize Theron) moves back home and sets her sights on the boy that got away. The fact that he's married is immaterial. David Robert Mitchell's *Sleepover* may prove to have enduring legs, thanks to the very talented cast assembled for this quiet drama about the last night of summer. Finally, a man is at the heart of the fitfully engaging *Gainsbourg* but he sure liked women, didn't he? It's rather routine as far as biopics go, but it's fun to hear those songs again.



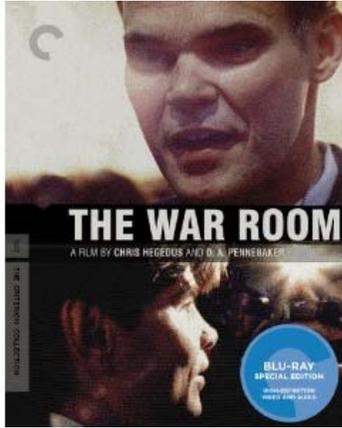
In Their Own Words (\$49.99; Athena) -- I can't even imagine why not a single US channel chose to pick up this BBC series about great writers and thinkers. Not PBS, not A&E, not any of them? It's a tad pricey as these specialty titles can often be. But this six part series is exactly the sort of thing you expect from public television. You hear audio recordings of Virginia Woolf, J.R. R. Tolkien speaking in Elvish, Jane Goodall on her pioneering work, William Golding, Salman Rushdie and many more.



The Killing First Season (\$49.99 BluRay; Fox)

Scarecrow and Mrs. King Third Season (\$39.98; Warner Bros.)

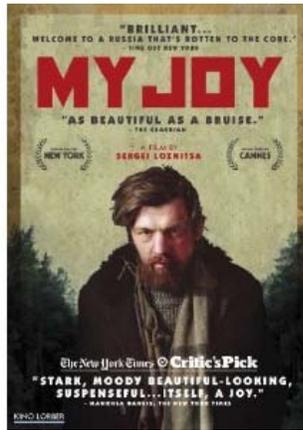
That '70s Show Season One (\$24.98 BluRay; Mill Creek) -- Since *The Killing* was famously pilloried for failing to resolve the season-long story arc about uncovering the killer, you'd think they would find some different cover art for the BluRay release than "Who Killed Rosie Larsen?" Uh, we don't know yet so why are you taunting us? I sampled a few episodes but decided to wait until I could watch the season in one gulp. Since the major plot point is left hanging, I'll be waiting till season two comes out but it looks great and the cast is strong. *Scarecrow* never made people wait longer than a single episode to resolve its mysteries. Kate Jackson was always my favorite Angel (I like smart women) and she proved her talent with this froth. *That '70s Show* barely let any suspense linger beyond a single scene. Some music cues are not original but the BluRay looks good and the price is right. It's a so-so sitcom elevated by a great cast including Ashton Kutcher, Laurie Prepon (who deserves better than the Chelsea Handler sitcom) and of course Topher Grace, the Jack Lemmon of his generation with an equal flair for drama and comedy.



The War Room (\$39.95 BluRay; Criterion) -- Filmmakers Chris Hegedus and D.A. Pennebaker have made more important, more illuminating films. But *The War Room* is great fun and captures a moment in the ever-changing world of political campaigns (They've always been nasty and barbed, mind you). Ah, how young George Stephanopolous looks; how tame in comparison to today's vipers the fact-based James Carville appears. It's all great fun and the extras are illuminating, such as the 2008 documentary film *Return Of The War Room*, panel discussions, video interviews with the filmmakers and a fascinating piece on my personal bete noire polling.



The Three Musketeers (\$30.49 BluRay; Summit) -- Do you need a "reason" to make yet another version of the Dumas swashbuckler? No, of course not. It's a perennial. Still, 3D is certainly no excuse; you do need a good cast and some passion for the material. Despite Orlando Bloom, Christoph Waltz and Milla Jovovich in key roles, this version is let down by it's D'Artagnan (Logan Lerman, who I still remember fondly for the TV series Jack & Bobby). He's better at likable than the arrogant jerk he's asked to assay here. And you'd be hard-pressed to top the defining version from 1973. So you don't need a "reason," you just need the talent to put your own special stamp on this tale.



My Joy (\$29.95; Kino Lorber) -- Documentary filmmaker Sergei Loznitsa shows an impressive command of technique and actors but fails in the rather important department of story in his fictional debut. The production notes helpfully inform me that the film's structure is based on the road system of Russia: main roads lead to arteries which lead to smaller roads which can dead end in a village. If you want to get anywhere, you have to turn around and go back. Not knowing that when watching the movie, all I knew was that one character led to the next in a series of vignettes, most of which ended in violence and corruption. A truck driver delivering flour gets "trapped" in a town. At one point, he takes up with a very young prostitute, who is maybe 14 or 15. His decency is somehow so obvious, we know he's not going to buy her services. What's amusing is how furious she becomes when he tries to do her a good turn. Like so many scenes in this film, it's vivid and funny and memorable. Unfortunately, the driver is killed and we move on to new characters. One after another is knocked off, with venal and vicious authority figures a favorite source of pain. Russia is trapped in a cycle of violence? Corruption is endemic? Life is bleak? Take your pick. It's a pity the film reduces itself to slogans since so much solid acting is on display.

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Why should I define myself by quoting others?

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10:16 PM on 04/01/2012

Tintin should have been done live, rather than ALMOST live CGI. Silly, really, to make it as they did. A good movie, don't get me wrong, but it could--and should--have been done with actors directly. This is a mistake that is becoming too common in Hollyweird.

I suspect that it will not be long before I am watching John Wayne in a space/western, perhaps with guest stars Roy Rogers and Tom Mix jet-packing in.

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metivo
170 Fans

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03:40 PM on 04/01/2012

Michael, I know it seems unbelievable that both Spielberg and Jackson failed to see that Tintin wasn't working. But remember that Spielberg has been batting zero for quite a while now and Jackson followed his great success in LOTR with the inept "Lovely Bones" movie. PLUS both of these guys are so full of themselves they probably can't see straight. I could have told them to do a straight animated movie using Herge's fabulous artwork but it's like a kid with the box of 64 colors of Crayola Crayons - too many to play with. They would have fared better with 16.

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Michael Giltz

freelance writer

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10:18 PM on 04/02/2012

Speilberg has hit a dry spell but he had many many years of strong movies. And I'm praying Jackson's Lovely Bones was a fluke and that he rights himself and does right by The Hobbit. Thanks for commenting.

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LMPE

I connect the most dissimilar things

1578 Fans

03:02 PM on 04/01/2012

Are they EVER going to release "Herge's Adventures of Tintin" on DVD?

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER

Michael Giltz

freelance writer

127 Fans

10:20 PM on 04/02/2012

Why that series from the 60s remains MIA is a puzzle. Even if the estate was unhappy with it, it deserves to be out on DVD. Thanks for posting.

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jhNY

Mercy.

1016 Fans

12:35 PM on 04/01/2012

As the illustration style of Tin Tin was at least as attractive and delightful as the plots and characters IN THE ORIGINAL, why the producers and directors chose to visually re-conceive the property for movie purposes is a mystery, given its failure to attract old lovers of Tin Tin, or many new ones.

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JailNeoconVicts
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02:29 PM on 03/31/2012

Regarding Tintin-- you're absolutely right. The off-putting effect has a name: Uncanny Valley Syndrome: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uncanny_valley

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Bev OkinLarkin
25 Fans

07:44 AM on 03/31/2012

I was in a fairly small crowd and the kids in the audience were BORED with TinTin. I had issues with the main character portrayed so blandly, the dragging plot and (to me) the jarring mish mosh of very nice near photorealistic characters with the cartoony ones. ESPECIALLY the scene with the female singer at the huge palace - I also HATED the inconsistency of cartoon physics - an oar to the back of the head knocks TinTin out but yet he can FLY on a motorcycle down the laundry line in the big chase. Either way I have read the books and enjoyed them - but the movie was just not right nor as entertaining as I would have hoped --- actually, I only ended up in there because "The Muppets" had already been bumped out of the theatre and I was ready for a second viewing.

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HUFFPOST BLOGGER
Michael Giltz
freelance writer
127 Fans

10:19 PM on 04/02/2012

The inconsistency of what can and can't be done is a very good point and shows the lack of care and thought put into it on a basic level. The Muppets was very good, by the way!

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