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## Michael Giltz

Posted November 21, 2008 | 04:57 PM (EST)

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# DVDs: Werner Herzog's Peripatetic Career



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Director Werner Herzog is well into one of the most eclectic, odd and engaging movie careers, one that jumps from personal epics to quixotic documentary films, and now even Hollywood spectacles. His latest movie -- *Encounters At The End Of The World* (\$27.98; Image) -- is a typically eccentric, engrossing and beautiful look at Antarctica. Herzog's grumpy narration is one of the joys of this quirky movie -- he arrives at this barren outpost and is thoroughly disgusted to see popular culture intruding even here. The way he drips with contempt about "yoga classes"

is a joy for misanthropes everywhere. But Herzog can't help himself. Even with such barriers to getting away from it all he manages to explore the strange and dangerous beauty of this location while discovering the real heart of the film: the strange and driven people who land here. (Most don't seem to have chosen Antarctica so much as simply found themselves there unexpectedly.) Scientists, "professional dreamers," cranks. They're the strangest lifeforms to be found there. And while this film doesn't have the narrative thrust of say, *Grizzly Man*, it's a thoroughly entertaining diversion. A second DVD contains loads of extras, including Jonathan Demme interviewing Herzog himself.

**More Documentaries** -- *Gonzo: The Life And Work Of Dr. Hunter S. Thompson* (\$26.98; Magnolia) covers the pioneering journalist's career but is mostly a pleasant excuse to have his famous friends -- like narrator Johnny Depp share their most entertaining stories about him; truly, the legend was outstripped by the (rather maniacal) man. *Operation Valkyrie: The Staufenber Plot To Kill Hitler* (\$19.98; Koch) is a so-so primer for the Tom Cruise movie about the Nazi conspirators who tried to take out the Fuhrer. *Planet B-Boy* (\$19.95; Arts Alliance America) is a documentary about break dancing around the world that disabuses people like me of the idea that it was just a fad from the 80s. Some great stuff here. *Garbage Warrior* (\$24.98; Open Eye Media) looks at architect Michael Reynolds and his sustainable eco-homes built from detritus and waste.

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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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He's more of an eccentric calling attention to waste than the purveyor of genuine solutions, but Al Gore fans will love it. *Bringing Balanchine Back* (\$19.98; City Lights) lovingly shows the New York City Ballet visiting Russia and preparing for a performance in St. Petersburg at the Mariinsky Theater where the company's late co-founder had his roots. Catnip for casual fans of dance. *Manhattan, Kansas* (\$19.95; Carnavalesque) is the painfully personal story of filmmaker Tara Wray struggling to deal with her emotionally disturbed mother who is determined to discover the Geodetic Center of the US, which she believes will bring about world peace. *Up The Yangtze* (\$29.99; Zeitgeist) is a remarkably frank look at China's Three Gorges Dam and the dramatic impact it has on the lives of the people displaced by it. It's a piercing look at the economic steamroller shaping that country and how it got made, I'll never know.

**BluRay Releases** -- *Band Of Brothers* on BluRay (\$99.98; HBO) is a top-notch release of one of the best projects Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks have done. Superior to *Saving Private Ryan* thanks to the scope and detail a miniseries offers, *BoB* is just a terrific miniseries. The sound especially is top-notch on this set and you get all the extras of the standard release plus more new stuff. Looks better and better with the passing years. I agonize over BluRay -- Hollywood should be using this superior format to keep people buying DVDs, not as an excuse to increase prices. But it is a serious step forward in picture quality, especially for those who have a 1080p widescreen TV. *Firefly: The Complete Series* (\$89.98; Fox) is a wonderfully compact collection of all 17 episodes from the cultish Joss Whedon series that followed *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*. Here's hoping for more movie spin-offs. *The Universe: Complete Season One* (\$79.95; History/A&E) makes full use of this science show's computer graphics and amazing visuals. *Kung Fu Panda* (\$39.99; Dreamworks) is another super-cool looking disc of the surprisingly effective animated film. Animation in general looks awesome on BluRay, so it's no surprise at all that *Wall-E* (\$40.99; Disney) is also a show-stopper, especially those gorgeous early scenes where Wall-E wanders alone through the Earth's desolate landscape. *Paul McCartney: The Space Within Us* (\$34.95; A&E) is a Beatles-heavy concert heard in terrific sound and hi-def, with the cute Beatle looking just fine as he cruises past 64. *Tropic Thunder* (\$39.99; Dreamworks) is a whole lot of heavy lifting for some light comedy, but you do get Robert Downey Jr. in blackface. BluRay-only releases include *The Story Of O* (\$29.98; Somerville House), the softcore French precursor to *9 1/2 Weeks* and *Black Christmas* (\$29.98; Somerville House) director Bob Clark's cult horror movie that is an *entirely* different take on the holiday he celebrated in *A Christmas Story*. Loads of extras include new interviews with Margot Kidder, a new documentary, cast members on a panel and more.

**DVD Games** -- Movie and TV DVD sales are down. In fact, a lot of areas of entertainment are down, like collapsing CD sales and primetime TV ratings. But one bright spot is video games. In an attempt to squeeze out some more business, Disney and Warner Bros. and others are coming up with DVD Game releases on their top franchises. *High School Musical DVD Game* and *Hannah Montana DVD Game* (\$29.99 each; Disney) contain very basic stabs at interactive gaming, with chances to karaoke and dance along with tracks from these shows. *Scooby-Doo DVD Game* (\$19.98; Warner Bros.) is an even more desperate attempt at interactivity with players using the remote to spot clues, match images, identify sounds and other painfully basic tasks. Obviously, none of these come within a country mile of the polish and excitement and cleverness of real video games and using the DVD remote to navigate them proves how staid they are. This is one hybrid that consumers should avoid.

**Stax Up Against Any Other Music Label** -- The Stax label ranks with Motown and Sun as one of the defining record labels of the rock/pop/soul era. Respect Yourself: *The Stax Records Story* (\$24.98; Infinity) is a terrific documentary narrated by Samuel L. Jackson that captures the electric talent of Stax, its remarkable rise and places it all in the context of the times. As a "bonus" -- and really, calling it just a bonus seems almost crazy -- you get Stax Volt Revue -- Live In Norway 1967, a legendary concert that shows the Stax family in full force, winding up with Otis Redding sending the polite Norwegian crowd into a frenzy with repeated encores on "Try A Little Tenderness."

**Other Music Releases** -- *Wild Combination* (\$24.99; Plexifilm) is an engrossing look at Arthur Russell, the avant-garde composer who also produced disco songs, wrote pop tunes and generally shone bright before dying of AIDS in 1992. With contributions ranging from Philip Glass to Jens Lekman, that gives you an idea of the wide range of styles he traveled in. *High Fidelity* (\$24.95; First Run) is an engrossing look at the Guarneri String Quartet as they tour the world. *Legendary Performances: Merle Haggard* (\$14.98; Shout) is the latest in a series of DVDs that pulls together

"Washington Unplugged"

Arianna was on CBS' "Washington..."

**Alex Leo** The "Real Housewives Of New York City" Flowchart Of Hate

I'm a little embarrassed to love this show as much as...

"BRUNO" TRAILER! Calamity, African Babies, Chase Scenes And More (NSFW VIDEO)

IT'S HERE! The trailer for this July's Sacha Baron Cohen...

**NATO Leaders Focus On Afghanistan, But Most Reject Obama's Plea For Troops** (SLIDESHOW)

STRASBOURG, France — On the eve of the NATO...

**First Lady Fashion At Friday's NATO Concert** (PHOTOS)

Another night, another fashion opportunity for NATO leaders and their spouses! See...

**Diana Palin, Sarah Palin's Sister-In-Law, Arrested For Breaking Into Home**

ANCHORAGE, Alaska — Police say Alaska Gov...

**John Oliver Explains The Real Reason You Never Touch The Queen** (VIDEO)

John Oliver was upset enough to drop his monocle when he...

**Obama Teases Reporter From India During Press Conference** (VIDEO)

Obama held a conference packed with press from around the world on Thursday. He called...

**Jim Cramer Declares The Depression "Over"** (VIDEO)

On Thursday's episode of "Mad Money" host Jim Cramer declared that the depression...

**Scientists Find Rocket Fuel Chemical In Infant Formula**

ATLANTA — Traces of a chemical used in rocket fuel were found in samples of...

**Least Wasteful Cities In America** (SLIDESHOW)

It's great to love the city you live in, and better to

every TV clip and performance they can find by an artist, which is catnip for any fan who loves them. How else would you see clips from long-lost shows like *Billy Walker's Country Carnival* and *The Porter Wagoner Show*? *Parliament Funkadelic: The Mothership Connection Live 1976* (\$14.98; Shout) is a Halloween night performance with George Clinton's band in full funk and tearing the roof off. Cosmic slop indeed. *Alison Kraus: A Hundred Miles Or More* (\$17.98; Rounder) is a lovely but too brief show with the sublime bluegrass singer joined by James Taylor, Brad Paisley and others. *Live From Abbey Road: The Best Of Season One* (\$19.98; Fremantle) is two+ hours of music from the best music show on TV right now. They just bring artists into Abbey Road and film them talking about music and performing their songs. Among the acts: Corinne Bailey Rae, Dr. John, Wynton Marsalis, Amos Lee, Kasabian and many more. The **new season is currently airing on Sundance**; don't miss it. *Smashing Pumpkins: If All Goes Wrong* (\$21.98; Coming Home Media) features a show from their 2007 tour and a full documentary about the travails of making it happen. it proves you can go home again...if you don't mind squabbling along the way. It's much easier if you never leave home, like *Twisted Sister: Live At The Astoria* (\$20.98; DR2) who are still not gonna take it, even at a 2004 concert in London captured here on CD and DVD. Finally, *Wu: The Story of the Wu-Tang Clan* (\$22.98; Paramount) is a substantial look at the seminal rap band by witer-producer-director Gerald K. Barclay.

**DW Griffith: Attention Must Be Paid** -- Another substantial DVD boxed set of pioneering Hollywood director DW Griffith from Kino, this one modestly titled *Griffith Masterworks 2* (\$89.95; Kino). It's hardly a boastful claim since Griffith was such a seminal figure in early movies and scholars and movie buffs should revel in these glorious prints. But this isn't quite as essential as Volume 1. *Sally Of The Sawdust* (1925) stars WC Fields in his second movie, but Fields without that inimitable voice is a mere shadow of what he'd accomplish later, juggling or no juggling. *The Avenging Conscience* (1914) is an entertaining mash-up of various Edgar Allan Poe stories. But his two sound films -- *Abraham Lincoln* (1930) and *The Struggle* (1931) -- seem constricted by the need to stay chained to boom mikes, despite Walter Houston's saintly portrayal of our last great President who sprang from Illinois. But the final two discs are the real keepers. *DW Griffith: The Father Of Film* is a 156 minute long documentary about his work. And *Way Down East* (1920) is his seminal melodrama, with that still-astonishing ice floe sequence at the finale.

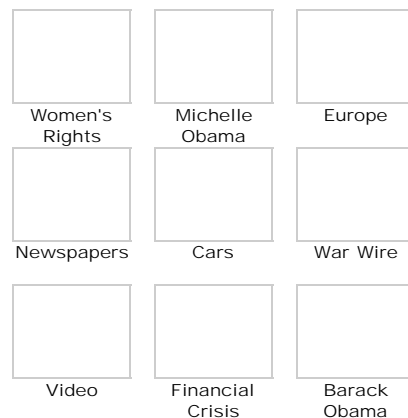
**Other Stuff** -- *Popeye The Sailor Volume Three 1941-1943* (\$34.98; Warner Bros.) is 32 more shorts of the grumbling spinach lover, many naturally with a war theme. Buffs will appreciate the many extras; kids will just giggle. *Goya* (\$24.95; First Run) is a look at the radical painter circa East Germany's Konrad Wolf. *Blood and Bones* (\$29.95; Kino) is the epic tale of a Korean in Japan consumed by violence with "Beat" Takeshi Kitano digging deep as the brutal head of his family. Much lighter is *Sukiyaki Western Django* (\$28.98 or \$34.98 on BluRay; First Look), the latest Asian spin on spaghetti westerns, this time by Takashi Miike. *Shaun The Sheep: Off The Baa!* (\$14.98; Lionsgate/HIT) is a compilation of eight amiable shorts from the creators of Wallace & Gromit and being free of the demands of a full-length film brings out the best in them. Really sweet. *The Apprentice* (\$15.98; Somerville House) captures a young Susan Sarandon investing her all in what amounts to little more than a quickie indie flick with lots of sexual intrigue. *Treasury Of 20 Storybook Classics* (\$29.95; New Video/Scholastic) collects 4 DVDs with 20 stories minimally animated but caringly read by celebrity voices like BD Wong, Sean Hayes and more.

**Rod Serling's Greatest Work** -- Some would argue his greatest triumph was the live TV play, *Requiem For A Heavyweight*. Most everyone else would name the one show everyone has heard of: *The Twilight Zone*. But some hardcore fans single out his later anthology series, the more gothic show *Night Gallery*. They're wrong, of course. *The Twilight Zone* is unquestionably Serling's masterpiece. But *Night Gallery Season Two* (\$59.98; Universal) is still fun, especially since the producers hadn't started rejecting Serling's scripts haphazardly, the way they would in the third and final season. It's no surprise to find director Guillermo Del Toro providing audio commentary - - this sort of creepy suspense is right up his alley.

**Other TV Stuff** -- *Father Knows Best Season Two* (\$39.99; Shout), a solid sitcom from a time when people actually believed that to be true. *Doctor Who: The Complete Fourth Series* (\$99.98; BBC Video) is the latest batch of episodes featuring the best Doctor since Tom Baker -- David Tennant, we'll miss you. *The Odd Couple Season 5* (\$39.98; Paramount) is the final season for the enduring silliness of two mismatched roomies; the defining New York sitcom until Seinfeld came along. *Hannah Montana: The Complete First Season* (\$39.99; Disney), is the Miley Cyrus series that redefined how popular a basic cable sitcom could be. *Bones Season Three* (\$59.98; Fox) is the crime show that glides by almost completely thanks to the marvelous chemistry of David Boreanaz

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by Michael Giltz

Affairs to remember: Farley Granger bedded Ava Gardner, Shelley Winters, and Leonard Bernstein. In his autobiography, Include Me Out, Hitchcock's muse ... (The national gay & lesbian newsmagazine)  
by Michael Giltz

and Emily Deschanel. Casting is indeed everything. *Tracey Ullman's State Of The Union* (\$26.9; Eagle Rock) proves this chameleon can indeed capture the essence of anyone (including Huffington herself). Fun, but I still yearn to see her original sketch show finally collected on DVD as well. *The Commander Set 1* (\$59.99; Acorn) finds creator Lynda La Plante covering familiar territory (a driven female police officer with a messy private life) but Amanda Burton does her best to avoid Mirren-like comparisons. and it's good fun for British mystery buffs. *SpongeBob SquarePants Season 5 Volume 2* (\$26.98; Paramount) brings to mind the fact that the show's creator was gonna call it a day ages ago but reconsidered, thank goodness. Silliness never goes out of style. *Mitzi Gaynor: Razzle Dazzle -- The Special Years* (\$24.98; City Lights) offers highlights from Gaynor's TV specials from the 60s and 70s. Fans will be relieved to get it, but one hour (and 80 minutes of bonus features) is far too little given the number of shows she did. Blame the cost of securing music rights, I imagine. *Hawaii Five-O Fifth Season* (\$38.99; Paramount) finds the venerable cop show in its peak of popularity when the show ranked #3 for the season.

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