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Knight to 4K

The Criterion Collection two-platter 4K Blu-ray presentation of Ingmar Bergman's 1957 **The Seventh Seal** (UPC#715515282819, \$50) is stunning. We reviewed Criterion's initial Blu-ray in Jul 09, but the film has since undergone a newer restoration. Just as the older Blu-ray represented an exciting improvement over what was a reasonably good looking DVD, so too does the 4K presentation represent an even more gripping and remarkable improvement over that earlier Blu-ray. You need look no further than the film's opening shot, of the morning sun burning its way through dark clouds. On the older BD, and even on the slightly better looking BD included with the 4K platter, there are dark speckles imprinted on the sunshine, as if it were raining or something. On the 4K platter, there are none. Throughout the presentation, even the new BD looks so grainy it is almost unwatchable after viewing the smooth and unblemished 4K presentation. The full screen black-and-white image is razor sharp from beginning to end, without a speckle or a touch of grain to be seen (okay, we did see one microscopic vertical line for a moment or two near the beginning, and a hair hanging from a subtitle later on, but those were the only flaws in the entire presentation). Again and again, the faces of the characters seem to be swarming with grain on the standard BD, but are smooth and precisely replicated on the 4K image.

The monophonic sound is also clearer and stronger, embellishing everything from the noises in the forest to the previously unnoticeable Erik Nordgren musical score. The voices are stronger, and the sound can be amplified to a greater intensity without distortion. The film is in Swedish with optional English subtitles. An English language track is also included, although that sort of spoils much of the film's allure. Not only do the voices feel more distanced and disconnected from the characters, but the scatological dialog highlighted so gleefully in the previously updated subtitled is blandly glossed over in the dubbing.

Now that the Fifties are about as far away from us as the Middle Ages, at least from a level-of-consciousness point of view, **The Seventh Seal** is no longer a work of profound spiritual introspection. But it remains an ultra funky depiction of that spiritual introspection and, from a cinematic perspective, is just as entertaining and rewarding in our jaded modern age as it was in its time. Max von Sydow is a Danish knight returning home after fighting in the Crusades, waking up on a metaphysical beach at the film's beginning and being met by the figure of Death, whom he challenges to a game of chess. He and his aide then begin crossing the countryside, where they meet villagers and a traveling entertainment group. Sometimes the individuals interact, sharing their thoughts about life and day-to-day living, and sometimes they seem oblivious to one another. Periodically, Death shows up again and exchanges a few moves on the chessboard with the knight. The knight also asks Death, and other individuals, about God and the nature of God. Bergman's heart is clearly with the traveling players, and the 97-minute film's basic entertainment is derived from the relationship spats among the villagers and the travelers, and the progress of their journey. Everybody eventually ends up back at the beach again, however, the eternal boundary between the known and the unknown.

Visually, the film is a joy, as its exploration of the nastiness of life in the Dark Ages is continually counteracted by the humanistic close-ups of the characters. The more the 4K presentation amplifies the movie's symbolism, the more it also amplifies the movie's human narrative, so that as time and perspectives advance, the purity of the film's beauty is sustained. For a very long time, **The Seventh Seal** was the very epitome of a 'foreign film,' a movie where people talk strangely, live strangely, and have strange but apparently deeply philosophical things happen to them. While that is no longer the case—with streaming, the concept of a foreign film has almost evaporated—the 4K presentation preserves that essence of the film's place in the history of cinema as

much as it allows the film's dynamics to grow and adjust to the times.

The special features that accompanied Criterion's previous Blu-ray release have been carried over. The 4K platter is accompanied by Peter Cowie's definitive commentary track, which provides a basic overview of the original interpretations of the film, as well as backgrounds and an analysis of the skills of the cast and the crew. The standard Blu-ray platter also has the commentary, along with a trailer, a 7-minute Bergman appreciation by Woody Allen, another 10-minute reflection on the film by Cowie, an additional 35-minute summary of Bergman's filmography by Cowie, a 20-minute audio-only interview with von Sydow, a 3-minute discussion with Bergman, and a comprehensive 2004 interview with Bergman running 83 minutes that Criterion previously released separately on DVD as **Bergman Island** (Jul 09), which is not to be confused with Mia Hansen-Løve's 2021 feature with the same title, also released by Criterion (Feb 23).

Isosceles Triangle

The highly lauded 2022 Ruben Östlund feature, **Triangle of Sadness**, runs 147 minutes and has three parts. The first and the last part have the same value and are outstanding, while the middle part, thankfully much shorter, is also of lesser quality, to the point where the film could probably have gotten from the one part to the other part without it and have been the better for it. But it is what it is. The Criterion Collection has released the film on a superb two-platter 4K Blu-ray set (UPC#715515283113, \$50), and the 4K presentation of the film, in particular, is so crisp and precise that it allows the viewer to savor every emotional nuance.

In the first part, Harris Dickinson and Charlbi Dean are fashion models attempting to maintain a romantic relationship in what for them is an exceptionally superficial world. Eventually, they go on a luxury cruise and meet a few filthy rich passengers, who are tended to by an alert and tireless crew. The last part is an inspired variation on James M. Barrie's reliable *The Admirable Crichton*, as a few surviving passengers, including the two models, are stranded on a deserted island where only one of the crewmembers, a Hispanic cleaning woman, played by Dolly De Leon, is competent enough in survival skills to save them. She also sets her eyes on Dickinson's character. These parts of the film are brilliant. The satirical reflections on wealth and consumerism are piercing, and the inner feelings of every character are palpable. The film is staged with such wit and exquisite discovery—all of which are enhanced not just by the gripping 4K image, but the dimensional strength of the DTS sound, as well—that every moment is enormously entertaining.

To get from the one part to the other part, there is a night with a storm and a subsequent morning in which pirates attack. During the storm, many of the passengers become seasick. A couple of films in the Eighties had vomiting scenes that were reasonably funny since, other than **The Exorcist**, such scenes had never been staged on film before. Their uniqueness was part of their surprise, and fuel for their humor. But in **Triangle of Sadness**, as in **Babylon** (see page 3), it just becomes a tiresome gag that outstays its welcome well before it is over. As for the pirates, you don't really see them, you just see the boat blowing up. In any case, we have friends that we would love to show the movie to because we know they would adore the first and last parts, but we can't bring ourselves to share it with them because of the middle, and we suspect other viewers may have the same reaction.

Woody Harrelson plays the boat's inebriated captain. The presentation is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. The film is mostly in English and is supported by optional English subtitles. The 4K platter contains only the movie, while the standard Blu-ray platter has both the film and special features. Because the film is so fresh, the differences between the two presentations are almost subliminal, but since the emotional effects of the film are also subliminal, the 4K presentation packs a much stronger punch. The supplements in the standard BD presentation include a

Triangle (Continued)

trailer, 13 minutes of deleted scenes that are terrific but a little too on the money, an interesting 6-minute piece on the plethora of often undetectable visual effects in the film, a funnier-if-you-were-there 15-minute segment about the film's producer stepping in front of the camera for the first time to do a somewhat complicated stunt, and a 19-minute interview with Östlund about his goals for the film. "I think it would be completely silly when some critics are saying to me, 'Yeah, it's a criticism towards capitalism.' Come on! It's definitely not a criticism towards capitalism. The film is dealing a lot of how our behavior is changing because of which position we have in a social structure. I like to mess around with some ideas that we have about us human beings in these times."

Binary stars

Here's something you don't see too often—Marlene Dietrich and Jean Gabin star together in a 1946 French production, **Martin Roumagnac**, an Icarus Films Home Video release (UPC#854565004047, \$30). The director, Georges Lacombe, milks his serendipitous casting for all it is worth. Michael Mann should take notes. After establishing the two characters, they meet by sitting next to one another at a prize fight, and so, with the sounds of the fight filling the audio, the camera just sits there, framing the pair in the same shot as they glance at one another out of the corners of their eyes, and then gradually become more intrigued. That scene alone is worth the price of the film, to savor the skillful interaction of two stellar performers, and the movie never lets up. You watch them act, you watch them embrace, you watch them talk about life, you watch them get hot and heavy in their underwear (thank goodness the movie is French!), you watch them fight, all, as often as not, in two-shots, so you can pick which star you want to monitor, or watch the movie twice to take in both. Set outside of Paris, Gabin plays a contractor in a small town, and Dietrich's character is a widow who owns a small bird shop and is bidding her time to hook a wealthier man when her hormones pull her toward Gabin's character instead. Running 108 minutes, it is a basic, competently executed French romantic melodrama, and while any two actors could have done a decent job of it, the earthy, believable and feeling performances of Gabin and Dietrich demonstrate why they were among the pinnacle of their profession. You come to ogle them, but you stay to savor their artistry (and to ogle some more).

The full screen black-and-white picture is in excellent condition, free of wear. Contrasts are crisp and blacks are shiny. The monophonic sound is fine and the film is in French with permanent English subtitles.

Diana Rigg bauble

An imperfect but special bauble from the Sixties, the 1969 Paramount production, **The Assassination Bureau**, has been released on Blu-ray by Paramount and Arrow Video (UPC#760137123132, \$40). Directed by a somewhat out-of-touch Basil Dearden, the film begins in the Edwardian era in London and stars Diana Rigg, often dressed like Mary Poppins (except at the climax, where she dresses like Maria von Trapp), as an earnest reporter attempting to overcome the rampant sexism of the day to write a story about a murder-for-hire organization that has upped the quality of political killings around the world. A newspaper owner played by Telly Savalas (who does the British press lord thing better than you'd expect) takes a chance on her, and she quickly works her way in to meet the head of the organization, played by Oliver Reed. The film is a comedy, often leaning on the absurd, some of it dryly spoofing the lack of contemporary technology in the time it is set. Rigg and Reed's characters, traveling across Europe, quickly team up to eliminate the members of the Bureau before they themselves are taken out. Running 110 minutes, when the film stays on Rigg's character it is a genuine delight, but when it strays, it is not. Reed was adept in comedy roles as well as in drama and action, but he doesn't have the make-believe heroic charisma that the film calls for. What is worse, Rigg is pretty much forgotten in the last act, where the action settles on Reed trying to stop a Jules Verne-ish dirigible from bombing the gathered leaders of the European powers. The film's period production designs and its quirky exposition would qualify the film as a Sixties cult favorite, but there is also something offish and contrived about its tone that undercuts its absurdities or its attempts at a consistently jaunty humor. Rigg's presence supersedes everything, but just barely.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85. The primitive special effects can be a little grainy or appear otherwise distorted, but other than that, the transfer is immaculate, with bright, fresh hues and accurate fleshtones. The monophonic sound is crisp. Ron Grainer's musical score is as problematic as the film itself, at times offering some delicious little hooks, but just as often grating a listener's ears with simplistic ditties. There are optional English subtitles, a trailer, a nice collection of memorabilia in still frame (forget the film—the lobby cards are to die for), and a good 28-minute appreciation of the film that explains the historical context of its creation.

The enjoyable film enthusiast team of Sean Hogan and Kim Newman supply an engaging commentary track, reacting to the movie as it unfolds and reiterating many of the topics that were brought forward in the featurette. "What was it about the years between 1885 and the First World War that produced so much popular culture? *Alice in Wonderland*. *Peter Pan*. *The Phantom of the Opera*. All the Wells novels. *Dracula*. All of these are things that we are remaking, over and over again. You cannot go a couple of months without one of these things being back in the public consciousness." While they don't quite connect the dots to realize that they are as far away from the Sixties as the Sixties were from the time when the film is set, they speak quite a bit about the fascination that movies had with that previous period of time (just as there is, now, a fascination with the Sixties), and they go over many such films that appeared around the same time. While

celebrating the film's production designs and its similarities to the spy films of the Sixties, they also analyze its flaws, as well as its saving graces (they point out that Rigg has a rare ability to, "Retain dignity in farcical surroundings."). As they explain, the film is based upon an unfinished novel by Jack London, of all people (from an idea by Sinclair Lewis, of all people; the novel was completed by the same author who penned the novel **Bullitt** was based upon, of all people), and that leads them into a surprisingly pertinent analysis of other movies based upon London's writings. They also, naturally, discuss zeppelin movies, and they point out that the film is overflowing with popular British character actors who show up sometimes for a single shot or two, but in doing their shtick, they leave a mark ("I actually think that the jokes in this film are less funny than the art direction, and the characters are funny. We have a fine array of mostly British but some continental character actors in whiskers and costumes. To me, part of the appeal of this film is just the chance to see all these people together playing off of each other.").

A good bad Ladd

A poor man's version of Pick-Up on South Street, Alan Ladd is a gangster who gets pulled into an espionage racket in the 1942 Universal production, **Lucky Jordan**, a Universal Kino Lorber Incorporated *KL Studio Classics* Blu-ray (UPC#738329262150, \$25), directed by Frank Tuttle. There's even an alcoholic old lady, played by Mabel Paige, suggesting that in a rudimentary manner, the film served as a template for Samuel Fuller's later masterpiece (they would make a sweet double bill). Ladd is most famous for playing a heroic cowboy, but his stardom was first ignited as an anti-hero, a villain and killer that he smartly presented as if he were the good guy and not some palm-rubbing, mustache-twirling evil doer. That is what he presents in this part, with Sheldon Leonard as the real villain, his supposed partner in a gambling syndicate. Ladd's character gets drafted and is uncooperative in training camp, going AWOL while accidentally lifting the plans for an upgraded weapon. He also hijacks a WAC, played by Helen Walker, who starts trying to talk patriotism into him and never lets up. Leonard's character learns about the stolen plans and makes a tempting monetary arrangement to unload them, while Walker's character escapes and contacts the FBI. The film is a little juvenile at times, but the performances supersede the quality of the script and running a quick 84 minutes, it is a continually entertaining wartime escape. Indeed, because its context is tied so closely to the War, and because Ladd does such a good job at first being wicked, it is something of a forgotten film, making its plot turns and surprises all the more satisfying.

The full screen black-and-white picture is in very nice condition. The image is a little grainy at times, but otherwise it is clean and sharp. The shadow of the sound boom can be seen at one point, swinging across a jeep. The monophonic sound is solid and there are optional English subtitles, along with a trailer. Film expert Samm Deighan supplies a very good commentary track, sharing rewarding information about the careers of the cast and crew, but also delving into how American film darkened with the onset of World War II. She also explains what a 'WAC' is, and she mentions **Pick-Up on South Street**, although she doesn't make the 'alcoholic old lady' connection, and compares the film most closely to the slightly more comical **All through the Night**. She makes note, as well, of how Hollywood's surging patriotism drove so many stories—from **Casablanca** to **Saboteur**, to name two others that came out in 1942—about reluctant heroes who rise to the challenge when confronted with fascism. "**Lucky Jordan** is such a product of its time and place. You get all of these Hollywood movies that shoehorned basically different types of plot tropes and genres to fit this war mold. So there's just this flood—I think this is really the only time this has happened in Hollywood history. Certainly, there are plenty of movies about the war in Vietnam, but these WWII films, the way that they just shove all these different genres together, into this sort of war propaganda film production machine, really is fascinating. It is continually fascinating that there are all of these films set on the home front that show how regular people at home, just because they're hundreds and thousands of miles away from the war, doesn't mean they can get complacent, because as these films suggest, there are fascists and fascist conspiracies afoot on the American home front, involving American traitors or foreign traitors who aren't obviously Nazis."

Confederate hero

The 'hero' is a Confederate officer who has stolen a fortune of Union gold near the end of the Civil War and has slipped across the border into Mexico so he can buy supplies to sustain the war effort. Once across the border, he meets greasy, corrupt Mexicans (played by Hispanic actors) and must navigate their greed to achieve his goals. So many socially incorrect components are at work, and yet, the 1954 Universal film, **Border River**, released on Blu-ray by Universal and Kino Lorber Incorporated as a *KL Studio Classics* title (UPC#738329262211, \$25), had us floating in transcendent bliss from beginning to end.

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Directed by George Sherman, the film runs just 80 minutes and stars Joel McCrea, with Yvonne de Carlo, Pedro Armendáriz, and Alfonso Bedoya. It is a western, with an inherent sense of innocence and purity in its exposition, upon which a modern comprehension of moral rot (and, in the case of the Mexican actors, inappropriate stereotyping) stands detached from the thrill of a basic and efficiently told story. The action is nicely varied and well paced, with fistfights, gunfights, chases and quicksand (which actually looks like a mud pit, but conveys the same excitement, or more so because of its fresh approach). There is also a sophisticated battle of wits between McCrea's character and Armendáriz's character, and there is a well tempered romance between McCrea's character and de Carlo's character. De Carlo is also the beneficiary of the gorgeous full screen Technicolor cinematography (and equally scrumptious picture transfer), which captivates a viewer not just with her complexion and makeup, but with her costumes and jewels, as well. From its very first moments, the film establishes itself as an escape from the real world. The impulse to embrace the fortitude of McCrea's relaxed determination (augmented by his star appeal, particularly as a star in westerns) and accept whatever happens in the spirit with which it is being offered is almost impossible to resist. In truth, that speaks more to why America has succeeded as a concept and an ideal as anything.

The source material is free of wear and is as sharp as it is colorful. The monophonic sound is in decent shape, and there are optional English subtitles, along with a trailer. Westerns expert Toby Roan supplies an admirable commentary track, systematically going over the skills and careers of every member of the cast and crew ("Sherman's pictures have a real economy to them. Not a frame is wasted, they move quickly, the dialog scenes never slow things down."), and sharing what is known about the production (McCrea messed up a stunt and hurt his lip, shutting down the shoot for a few days). He also shares pertinent insights regarding various aspects of the film. "Quicksand turns up in a lot of movies, especially jungle pictures, but have you ever encountered any in real life? As a kid who watched too many movies, I was terrified of it. So what is quicksand anyway? Quicksand is just a mixture of sand or silt or soil, and water. The sand or whatever gets saturated in the water, and when it's disturbed—by a horse, in this case—it becomes liquefied soil and it can't support much weight. What's important to know is that whatever or whoever ends up in quicksand will only sink to the level where the weight of the object equals the weight of the water-sand mix. So, trusting the science, it is impossible for someone to completely sink in quicksand, and contrary to what you see in the movies, there's no suction to pull you down. You'd only 'sink' to about your waist."

Dazzling Asphalt

On paper it looks like *Carmen*, updated to the teeming metropolis of Berlin, but under the magnificent direction of Joe May, the 1929 German silent, *Asphalt*, released on Blu-ray by F.W. Murnau Murnau Stiftung, Kino Lorber Incorporated and Kino Classics (UPC#738329261931, \$30), is dazzling and gripping cinema from start to finish. Greatly aided by an exceptionally good and highly dimensional saxophone and orchestra musical score freshly composed by Karl-Ernst Sasse, the film begins as a city poem movie before zeroing in on a perfectly—indeed, precisely—coiffed flapper played by Betty Amann (named 'Else,' no less, sending your mind reeling into *Cabaret*) who is conning a diamond merchant and palming one of his diamonds in a jewelry store. The theft is discovered almost immediately, however, and an earnest young cop, played by Gustav Fröhlich, is called upon to take the young woman into custody. On their way to the station, she talks him into letting her go to her apartment first to pick up her identification documents, and they never get around to going to the station. Running 94 minutes, the film pushes its drama forward vividly, with richly drawn characters whose humanity is readily apparent despite the costuming and stereotyping—the cop's loving parents save the day. May's approach is both breathless and invigorating, which is why the music then sends the film into stratospheric entertainment. Yes, it's a terrific silent film, but the Blu-ray, fed into a jacked-up sound system, makes it even better.

Put together from several sources, the full screen black-and-white picture is in good condition for its age, with modest wear. The intertitles are in German and are supported by optional English subtitles, although the white subtitling is sometimes overwhelmed by the white intertitles. Fortunately, the intertitles, on a whole, are minimal. The 5.1-channel DTS sound, as we mentioned, is fantastic and unlike so many silent movies, the musical score contributes significantly to the film's appeal (and yes, at a couple of points, the score delves fleetingly into Bizet). German film expert Anthony Slide supplies a fairly complete commentary track, summarizing the careers of the cast and crew ("In a way, it is easy to see why Betty Amann's career did not prosper after *Asphalt*. She suffered from the same problems as Louise Brooks. Her look was unique. It belonged to a then specific period in history. It quickly went out of style, out of fashion. There was no demand for performances from Louise Brooks or Betty Amann. Both, mind, looking incredibly modern from the viewpoint of 2022, but both looked dated from the viewpoint of 90 years earlier."), sharing details about how the film was constructed (even busy traffic sequences were shot on a stage), and while he doesn't find the film as exquisitely composed as we do, he still appreciates its many strengths. "This may not perhaps be the most important sequence in the film—certainly not one that remains in the mind but is one that demonstrates the quality of acting on display here. There are no cheap melodramatics, no heightened drama. I don't think you can get better acting than this in silent films. It is beyond reproach."

Goodness knows

A live recording of a 2021 London West End performance of *Anything Goes*, originally broadcast on PBS in 2022, has been released on Blu-ray by MVDvisual (UPC#760137118107, \$25). The production was reconstituted from a 2011 Broadway revival, and even landed (at the last moment) the Tony-winning star of the 2011 show, Sutton Foster, as Reno Sweeney, with the marvelous Robert Lindsay as the gangster. Set aboard an ocean liner crossing from New York to England and adorned with many famous songs by Cole Porter, the story is an enjoyable confusion of identities and romances, and the production has some genuinely laughable moments (the original 1934 show's embarrassing Asian stereotyping has long since disappeared). Foster may not have quite the flair that the part calls for (while the Roaring Twenties setting is supported by the period designs and costumes, she is steadfastly contemporary), but she conveys an assured and commanding presence, especially during her songs, not the least of which is the grand title number closing out the first act. Samuel Edwards is suitably functional in the workhorse role as the male lead, and Lindsay is a joy.

Letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1, the presentation has both the pros and the cons that are typical for this type of program, with the advantages definitely outweighing the shortcomings. Because it is intended as a video entertainment and not just a dry recording of the show, the choreography is edited, so as you watch one camera angle, you have to imagine what is happening on the rest of the stage. This can be especially frustrating since the set is three levels high, and in the show's grandest numbers, something is happening on every level. The editing does include full stage shots to convey the complete image that theatergoers are experiencing, but a subsequent cut to an angle you aren't interested in seeing is inevitable. Additionally, MVD's chapter encoding does not bring you to the start of the songs, just the beginnings of major scenes. That said, the picture is vividly crisp and the sound is so clear you can hear how out of breath the performers are after they are done dancing but have to go on with the dialog. The optional English subtitling includes an accurate transcription of the lyrics for each song, readily enabling karaoke if you are so inclined. Ultimately, while the BD may, by the necessity of the format, undercut some of the thrill of actually being there, the immediacy and clarity of the solidly colored image and the liberating DTS sound come awfully darn close to replicating the experience anyway, all for less than the price of a ticket, let alone a flight to London.

Hollywood or bust

A potty-mouth *Nickelodeon*, *Babylon* was a flop because filmmakers forget that mass audiences aren't interested in the nuances of Hollywood history. Sure, people will turn out for something big and specific now and then, but Damien Chazelle's 2022 depiction of the transition from silent films to sound—in addition to celebrating obscure anecdotes about the ribald history of moviemaking—is a genuinely terrible film, so even movie-loving viewers who have a soft spot for Peter Bogdanovich's famous misfire will feel a pit in their stomachs by the time the 188-minute feature grinds to its close—well over a half hour after the demise of the characters played by its two biggest stars, Brad Pitt and Margot Robbie. The opening depiction of the orange groves, hills and desert that would later become a sprawling metropolis is impressive, but there is no narrative of substance and barely enough plot to string the episodes together. The elephant poop scene and the fancy party vomit scene might generate a laugh or two, but such chuckles are few and far between. There is also an extended and satisfying sequence about a day's outdoor shoot, which is intended to contrast a later sequence depicting how restrained everything was when sound was introduced, as if it were sound and not the Production Code that turned everyone into prudes. Diego Calva plays a low level assistant who works his way up in the industry and is intended to be the viewer's neutral eye on the debauchery and artistic growing pains going on around him. Robbie is an actress who is too strung out to make the transition to sound, and Pitt—who never connects with her regardless of how the film's marketing tries to sell the two characters as a couple—is an established star who tires of trying to sustain his success, or his life, for that matter. In the old days, the stars would have had to be part of a film's sexual escapades, but now the skin is ghettoized, and so the stars are separated from one another and the film plods through their rises and falls without generating much enthusiasm. If the movie had lived up to its title, it might have been something, but with anachronistic jazz playing at every party and nightclub, and the script's concentrated effort to have a modern inclusiveness check off list, you don't believe the sex, anyway, however much it may be based upon whispered legends, and so instead of lamenting a loss of innocence, the film ends up inadvertently celebrating the vacuity of orgies.

Paramount has released a two-platter Blu-ray (UPC#191329234242, \$32) with the film appearing on the first platter. If playback is terminated, it does not pick up where you left off. Letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1, the image is smeary in darker sequences, but when there is enough light, the picture is sharp. The Dolby Atmos sound has a bland mix, as if by the time the engineers started working on it everyone realized what a turkey the movie was and decided not to try too hard. There is an audio track that describes the action ("As flickering torches burn around him, he lifts the rat over his head. Jim gives Manny an exuberant look, mouth open in delight. The performer lifts his mask and lowers the rat into his mouth, blood spraying as he chews."), alternate French, Spanish and Portuguese tracks, and twelve subtitle options including English. The second platter contains 35 minutes of passable production featurettes and 9 minutes of sensibly removed deleted scenes (they should have taken out more) including one lovely sequence where a gossip reporter, played by Jean Smart, chats to pass the time with an extra clad in armor during a break in shooting. It didn't belong in the film, but the film would have been infinitely better if it had more scenes like it.

Lubitsch silents

The most amazing aspect to the many amazing aspects of Ernst Lubitsch's 1921 silent comedy, **The Wildcat**, released on Blu-ray by F.W. Murnau Murnau Stiftung, Kino Lorber Incorporated and Kino Classics (UPC# 738329261955, \$30), is how similar the film is to a work of physical art. The shape of the screen is constantly manipulated by irises and mattes, underscoring the narrative by literally 'shaping' the view of the action. Whether the image is left to a thin horizontal rectangle on the top of the screen, or displayed within a frame of curlicues, an emotional response to that design amplifies an emotional response to the narrative. What those images also reveal is the workings of the magnificent German motion picture production factory, with huge, creatively designed sets. History has been most impressed with these expressionistic creations when they were utilized in science-fiction and thriller films, to mirror the dark complexities of the human psyche, but here Lubitsch has harnessed them for an opposite purpose, to reiterate the playfulness and joyousness of human desire, with fanciful structures and exaggerated stagings. It is within the ambience that Lubitsch creates with his production designs that he can embellish the clowning exaggerations of his comedy without negating the flow of his romantic narrative. We don't want to spoil the film's funniest moment, but it outdoes the highpoint of Buster Keaton's **Seven Chances** on a scale that has to be seen to be believed, and it is because the film has established rules where such an incident is possible that he can get away with its hysterical excess.

Pola Negri stars as the leader of her father's band of thieves (watch her instinctively—and delightfully—pocket every valuable object within reach without batting an eye or shifting her gaze), and Paul Heidemann is a womanizing (to say the least) lieutenant who has been obligated to enter an engagement with a princess. The two meet, and it is an immediate attraction of fellow travelers, their romance beginning in the thieves' mountain camp and then continuing when Negri's character and her gang sneak into the castle during the wedding celebrations. In some ways, the fanciful architecture and decorations, and the slapstick performances, are no different from the magnifications inherent in the design and the acting within **The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari**, and the net result is the same. Despite the movie's constant absurdity, it remains utterly entertaining specifically because its manner justifies every silly moment.

The full screen black-and-white picture is in lovely condition, with sharp details and minimal damage. The German intertitles, supported by optional English subtitles, have been redone, but because the image looks so nice, their newness does not interrupt the film's mood. On the other hand, the music, from a small orchestra, is rather bouncy and is best kept to a minimal volume. Although he doesn't entirely know what to make of it, film historian Anthony Slide supplies a reasonably good commentary track. He does just describe the action at times, but he also provides a decent history of the production and the cast and crew, and he discusses different approaches to appreciating Lubitsch's effort. "I could find no comedy comparable to that here. However, perhaps I am seeking out the wrong genre. Perhaps it is more appropriate to identify **The Wildcat** as surrealism in its most absurd and original. There are visual tricks here, such as the manner in which scenes are formatted in the frame, that belong to the surrealist movement. There is structure here they would reject, but then the storyline, the structure, is hardly realistic."

Also featured is a 1916 film not only directed by Lubitsch, but starring him as well, **When I Was Dead**, which runs 37 minutes. He plays a husband who is locked out of his townhouse by his mother-in-law (who tells everyone he has died), and so he puts on a disguise to answer an ad for a butler. All of the actors, including Lubitsch, mug repeatedly for the camera. Some of the gags are amusing, and the basic premise has promise, but viewers seeking the more sophisticated forms of film comedy that Lubitsch almost single-handedly developed will have to look elsewhere. The full screen black-and-white image is heavily tinted in places and is a little ragged, but workable. The musical score is a pleasant mix of piano and strings that is reasonably effective. The intertitles are in German with optional English subtitles. Lubitsch expert Joseph McBride supplies a commentary, describing the action a lot of the time, but also going into details about Lubitsch's early career and other aspects of the production.

Kino International released **The Wildcat** previously as a *Lubitsch in Berlin* DVD title (UPC#738329051822, \$30) with an older transfer. While the presentation is workable, it is not as nice as the upgraded picture on the Blu-ray. The image is softer, and the intertitles are in English. A text filmography for Lubitsch is included.

Those who are familiar with Lubitsch primarily from his intimate—and near perfect—romantic comedies in the sound era may well be surprised to discover that he was pretty much the Cecil B. DeMille of Germany's UFA production studios. Casts of hundreds and grand production designs are the hallmark of several of his silent features. In the 1920 **Sumurun**, another Murnau Stiftung Kino Blu-ray (UPC#738329261962, \$30), Negri is heavily promoted on the jacket cover and indeed is the focus of the first shot in the film, but Jenny Hasselqvist stars as the title character, the member of a harem who prefers the son of her harem's sheik. Both the son and the sheik, however, as well as everyone else, fall for with Negri's character, a dancer in a traveling show. Lubitsch also plays a hunchback in the show, who is obsessed with Negri's character as well. Staged in elaborate Middle Eastern facades that are several stories high and busily populated, the 103-minute melodrama has a reasonably complicated narrative and sustains its momentum effectively. The acting is over the top, even for a grand silent production, but Lubitsch never lets things get out of control, even when the streets are jammed with extras from one side of the screen to the other, and Negri—who is a breath of fresh air in contrast to the other actresses—moves through those crowds effortlessly. You never lose sight of her.

The full screen black-and-white picture is mildly tinted and is again presented with newer German intertitles that are supported by optional English subtitles. There is a relaxed and effective piano musical score. Also featured is an interesting silent 12-minute clip of screen tests for various actors (it is easy to pick which one would be the best) to play Beelzebub in an ultimately unmade 1923 American production of *Marguerite and Faust* that Lubitsch worked on.

Kino released **Sumurun** as a *Lubitsch in Berlin* DVD title, as well (UPC#738329051624, \$30). Again, it is an older transfer, with English intertitles. The tinting is heavier and the source material, along with being softer, is more riddled with scratches and other markings. There is another nice collection of memorabilia in still frame.

Even more impressive is Lubitsch's equally elaborate 1920 production of **Anna Boleyn**, another *Lubitsch in Berlin* DVD title (UPC#738329051723, \$30). It has another cast of hundreds, this time with towering Tudor facades. The story has been well told in sound films and miniseries, but at the time of the movie's UFA production, it was a less familiar tale and Lubitsch's organization of the narrative and its at least reasonable historical links is excellent. Emil Jannings delivers an impressive performance as Henry VIII. He's not as endearing as Charles Laughton would be a decade later, but surrounded by a few actors who are still playing to the balconies with their hand movements and facial expressions, his acting is light-years beyond them. His mannerisms are reserved and mature, while his comportment is unmistakably regal. He is, without question, the king, whenever he enters the shot. Henny Porten plays the title character, who, in this version, is completely and steadfastly innocent, from beginning to end, victimized by the various men in power as soon as she arrives in court. By this point in his career, Lubitsch was applying his irises and mattes more judiciously, but each one is incisive and moving. Running 118 minutes, the film's pomp and grandeur makes an effective background for its sad story, and however much its topic has been superseded by subsequent interpretations, it is a valid and well-executed starting point.

The full screen picture is a little soft and mildly tinted in places, but is generally in good condition. The updated intertitles are in English. There is an effective unobtrusive piano and strings musical score. The occasional German texts that appear within the film are overwritten with English subtitles. Along with the Lubitsch filmography, there is a terrific collection of original memorabilia in still frame.

Ossi Oswalda stars in a lavish romantic comedy from 1919, *The Oyster Princess*, the main feature on **The Oyster Princess and I Don't Want to Be a Man**, a *Lubitsch in Berlin* DVD release (UPC#738329051525, \$30). In a contemporary setting, she portrays the spoiled daughter of a wealthy businessman, pining to marry a prince. Her father makes a deal with a destitute monarch, unseen, but when the monarch's aide shows to make the final arrangements, he is mistaken for his boss and she marries him instead. The 60-minute film is notable for its elaborate sets and their accompanying absurdities—the businessman has scores of servants in his mansion, who march up and down the stairs in a constant stream, each one dedicated to a minute task. Oswalda's energetic and natural performance is also an appealing exception to the other performances in the film and elsewhere at the time, but Lubitsch was clearly on the road to seeking humor through the exaggerations of grandeur, and warming up for the bigger silent productions that would eventually catch Hollywood's eye. The full screen black-and-white picture has no more than modest wear. The musical score is jaunty, and also supports an elaborate ballroom dancing sequence much more effectively than such scores usually do. The modernized intertitles are in English (as Lubitsch's films advance, his intertitles become fewer and fewer).

Oswalda also stars with Lubitsch in Lubitsch's startling 1919 *I Don't Want to Be a Man*, which runs 45 minutes and is included on the platter along with the Lubitsch filmography. Lubitsch plays the guardian for a bratty teen daughter, played by Oswalda, of another wealthy businessman. When the businessman has to leave for an extended period of time, the guardian imposes stern rules. To circumvent them, Oswalda's character dresses like a man and goes out on the town, eventually, and still in the guise of a man, making out with Lubitsch's character. Sure, Shakespeare wrote that sort of thing more than once, but when it comes to motion pictures, the movie is something of a groundbreaking event and a significant milestone. The entire film is a fascinating assault on gender presumptions. The tradeoff is that the narrative is somewhat confused and convoluted, but Lubitsch more than proved himself as adept and even innovative when it came to the language of film in other features. Here, he is speaking in an entirely different tongue, and it is just as revolutionary. The full screen black-and-white picture has a worn appearance, but is watchable, and the mostly string musical score works fine in accompaniment. Again, the updated intertitles are in English.

A genuinely comical fable from 1919, **The Doll**, another *Lubitsch in Berlin* DVD (UPC#738329056025, \$30), also has echoes of **Seven Chances**, as the hero will inherit money only if he gets married before his uncle passes away. Hoping to outwit everyone, he buys a very elaborate, life-sized doll, except that there is a mix-up at the dollmaker's, so he actually brings home the dollmaker's daughter (who realizes if she plays the part, the money will be her's, as well). Running a brief 64 minutes, the set designs are deliberately toy-like (there are also the best 'men in horse suits' we've ever seen) and the performances are exquisite, timed to perfection, and leading, in the film's best parts, to one laugh aloud moment after another. The full screen picture is lightly tinted and has some speckling, but looks okay overall. The intertitles, however, are in an annoying Gothic typeface that disrupt the flow of the comedy. The Lubitsch still frame filmography is also included.

Finally, the disc also contains an outstanding 109-minute documentary from 2006, *Lubitsch in Berlin*, which goes over Lubitsch's entire life and career until he left Germany for the last time at the beginning of sound. Not only does the film have extensive interview material with both his daughter and his aunt, but there are also some terrific audio interviews with Jannings and Porten, along with extensive clips from many silent films (most of which are thoroughly deconstructed), including those that featured Lubitsch as an actor before he made the shift to directing. The dynamics of the early German film industry are also described. Certainly anyone wanting to know who Lubitsch was and how he developed as an artist will want to start their investigation with the program, which is partly in English and partly in German, with permanent English subtitles.

Alcoholic star

A 1956 alcoholism movie that MGM dressed up with musical numbers, *I'll Cry Tomorrow*, has been released on Blu-ray by Turner Entertainment Co. and Warner Bros. as a *WB Archive Collection* title (UPC# 883929807857, \$22). Based upon the autobiography of entertainer Lillian Roth, Susan Hayward stars and, apparently, does her own singing to replicate a couple of Roth's biggest hits. Meanwhile, a series of men, played by Ray Danton, Don Taylor, Richard Conte and Eddie Albert, come into her life and fuel her downward spiral to the point where she is raped in a squatters hovel. She finally turns to AA, making the film one of many promotions the organization has received from Hollywood over the years. Running 119 minutes, the film still feels like sections were removed to push the story forward, and it has something of an episodic nature, with Conte's segment being the most enjoyable, in a sadistic sort of way. Jo Van Fleet plays her mother, and the film was directed by Daniel Mann.

The black-and-white picture is presented in letterboxed format with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. The picture is a little grainy at times, but is otherwise clean and sharp. The monophonic sound is reasonably strong. There are optional English subtitles and a trailer.

As for Hayward's performance, she is fine when her character is down in the dumps, but she is, oddly, never really persuasive as a star, lacking the sense of presence that her character ought to convey in the beginning. She is well coiffed, but a bit too laid back. In contrast, Warner has included a marvelous 20-minute Vitaphone musical short from 1934, *Story Conference*, starring Roth, whose charisma and screen magnetism is immediately apparent when the camera cuts to her. The segment supposedly presents song ideas that the studio is batting around, cutting to the imagined numbers that are substantially less elaborate than full Busby Berkeley spectacles, but along the same lines (instead of *Honeymoon Hotel*, they do *Alimony Hotel*—with several of the same internal rhymes). In any case, Hayward also pales in comparison to Doris Day's effort in the thematically similar MGM production, *Love Me or Leave Me* (Jul 09). Also featured on the disc is 10 minutes of clips from various MGM promotional programs hosted by George Murphy, which include an interview with Hayward and scenes from the film that utilize alternate takes, along with a nice minute-long newsreel clip of Hayward and Roth in a joint appearance, beaming like they were besties, and another minute-long newsreel clip about Hayward receiving an acting award from *Look Magazine*.

Warner released the film previously on DVD (UPC#012569797192, \$18) with slightly different letterboxing. The DVD has an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1 with an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The BD letterboxing is slightly masked on the top and bottom of the image in comparison to the DVD. The image on the BD, however, is much sharper and somewhat smoother than the image on the DVD. While the DVD presentation looks decent, the BD is nicer and, hence, more engaging. The monophonic sound on the BD is also stronger. The DVD has the same special features that were carried over to the BD, but the chapter encoding is different.

Wertmüller western

The film's title card says that it was directed by the pseudonymous Nathan Wich, but the disc jacket for the Kino Lorber Raro Cinema Art Visions Blu-ray, *The Belle Starr Story* (UPC#738329261993, \$30), says that the 1968 feature was directed by Piero Cristofani and Lina Wertmüller, and that Wertmüller replaced Cristofani after a few days of shooting. We would not be surprised. The erotic relationships in the film are typical of Wertmüller's Ayn Rand-like romances, more eventually-consensual rape than actual love. Elsa Martinelli stars with Robert Wood and George Eastman. The first half of the 100-minute feature includes a lengthy flashback so that it depicts the heroine's interludes with each man, and how her time with the first is shaping her time with the second. The latter part of the film is an elaborate jewel heist, and it is pretty ridiculous. Without going into details, Martinelli's character collects a fairly large gang and then goes about pulling off a complicated job in a tight space that would have required four people at the most. The others are only there so the film can have more corpses by the time the robbery is over. Throughout the film, incidentally, the characters smoke plastic-tipped cigars, which we doubt they picked up at the local general store. Martinelli, Wood and Eastman all have magnetic screen presences, and the film is a Spaghetti western (the only one, according to the jacket, ever directed by a woman), so it has a basic appeal that will be enough of an attraction for some viewers, but more discerning fans won't be missing much by passing it by.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. The color transfer looks fresh—which adds to the attractions of the many close-ups provided to the stars—although darker sequences are a little murky. The monophonic sound is quite sheer, particularly when the musical score kicks in, and is best held to a modest volume. Martinelli also sings a song several times, in English. Speaking of English, there is an alternate presentation of the movie with an English language track that is in a battered, faded and cropped full screen

format. That said, the dubbing is surprisingly good. Finally, feminist genre expert Samm Deighan supplies a commentary track over the original Italian feature, speaking extensively about Wertmüller's career, the reason for the film's three-part narrative structure (Wood was fired and replaced by Eastman, so Wertmüller turned all of his scenes into the flashback), the careers of the cast members, the presence or lack thereof of major female parts in Spaghetti westerns, and the dynamics of the film itself, which she greatly admires (she tends to ignore its shortcomings and never notices the cigar thing). "She sort of smashes together this political awareness and this very real anger about social injustice with these really sexy sequences and this wonderful but also grotesque comedy, beautiful set pieces and costumes. It's just such a perfect combination of things. It's wonderful that this film is being made available for a new generation of film fans and maybe to people who are long-time Wertmüller fans but had trouble accessing this. It's not talked about in the context of her career very often, but it is important to remember it as a stepping stone in her legacy, as an early film that proved she could take on a problematic production and turn it around, and was a competent professional filmmaker who could take a work for hire project and work within a very specific subgenre while also really continuing to explore some of the themes that would preoccupy her throughout her life and her career as a filmmaker."

Dark Dutch comedies

A dark and quirky 2001 Dutch comedy with basically five characters, *Amnesia*, has been released in a two-platter Blu-ray set by Cult Epics (UPC#881190020494, \$40). Directed by Martin Koolhoven, Freda van Huêt delivers a reasonably impressive performance as twin brothers, one a gregarious thief and the other a somewhat more timid photographer. The film is set in their mother's house, which is a fairly large mansion sitting in the center of an enormous wooded junkyard. The mother is ill. The photographer has brought along what he had thought would be a one-night stand, a would-be hairdresser played by Carice van Houten, and the thief is accompanied by an associate who has apparently been shot in the stomach but is reticent to seek medical assistance. Running 89 minutes, the film just sort of gets various characters into the rooms of the house in different pairings and lets the tensions percolate. While it initially seems quite abstract, the pieces of the puzzle are gradually filled in, and although the film has its limitations, it is a reasonably amusing and intriguing mix of desperate and clueless personalities.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.66:1. The colors are slick and the image is sharp. The DTS sound has a mild dimensionality that is effective in some sequences and less compelling in others. The film is in Dutch with optional English subtitles and is accompanied by a terrific 46-minute conversation between Koolhoven and van Houten, talking about several of the films they made together and the progress of van Houten's subsequent career (among other things, she played the witch in *Game of Thrones*)—at the end, he starts pitching ideas to her for another collaboration; a good 38-minute interview with Koolhoven about making the film ("I wanted a story that mixed different worlds together—the metaphysical or mythological or spiritual or whatever—everything we know of what I, in my everyday life, think is nonsense. But as a story, I think it's lovely."); a minute-long interview with van Houten on the set of the film explaining why she has to do a particular scene; and a trailer. Koolhoven, van Huêt and Dutch film critic Peter Verstraten also provide a reasonably good commentary track in English, going over the film's production as well as the meanings of the drama.

The second platter contains two telefilms written and directed by Koolhoven (and neither of the two could ever have appeared on American television in the day). Running 55 minutes, the oxymoronically titled *Dark Light*, from 1997, has just two characters, a burglar who gets knocked out one night while rifling a remote farmhouse, and the owner of the farm, an elderly woman suffering from boils on her face and arms, who chains him up before he comes to. The drama is not for the squeamish—in addition to the festering boils, a pig is slaughtered in an unflinching sequence—but the psychological battle that grows between the two characters is admirably executed and the film is fully involving from beginning to end.

The second film, *Suzy Q.* from 1999, which won a number of awards, runs 85 minutes and is another tale about a dysfunctional family, this one living in Amsterdam in the Sixties. Van Houten plays the title character, the youngest of three teenage kids whose father is an out-of-work bully and whose mother tries to stay as detached from reality as possible. The father is also coming very close to sexually abusing his daughter to assuage his unemployment. Her older brother is mostly isolated from the family, smoking weed and playing in a rock band, or practicing in his room. Her closer brother has a cruelty streak in him, which comes to the fore when he tries to date the girl upstairs. The film has some delightful moments—the heroine talks her way into a hotel room where Marianne Faithful and Mick Jagger (played by actors) are staying—that contrast effectively against its darker explorations. When it comes to depicting human nature and psychology, all three films have a hyper reality that is an acquired taste, but all three also have an incisive sense of humor that peeks out regularly amid the emotional horrors.

On both films, the picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.66:1. The darker sequences in *Dark Light* are slightly smeary (the dank, wintry farm setting is an ideal reflection for the souls of the characters), but *Suzy Q.* is sunnier and has a slightly fresher image. Both have more stray speckles than were present on *Amnesia*, but overall the transfers look okay and are not distracting. On both, the sound has a slight dimensionality and is reasonably clear. The two programs are in Dutch with optional English subtitles, and come with trailers.

War in the Pacific

A really good 1962 wartime adventure produced by Universal, **No Man Is an Island**, has been released by Universal and Kino Lorber Incorporated as a *KL Studio Classics* title (UPC#738329262129, \$25). Shot in the Philippines, the film is set in Guam, where a team of U.S. Navy radio operators escapes to the hills when the Japanese attack and take over the island. Jeffrey Hunter stars, with Marshall Thompson. Running 114 minutes, the film is episodic and drawn at least partially from true stories, sustaining an interest in the fates of the heroes as they must withdraw further and further from civilization to not only avoid being captured, but to avoid endangering the locals who are helping them. Hunter's movie star presence makes an ideal centerpiece to hold the film together. Directed by John Monks, Jr. and Richard Goldstone, the film was made far enough after the end of the war to include some gruesome moments and to present flawed characters, demonstrating that sometimes the closer a film comes to depicting reality, the more patriotic it really is.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. The color transfer is very accurate—the brown makeup used on the Philippine performers is often quite obvious. It is also clear, however, that some of the film was manufactured in the editing room, as a sequence of shots will shift from being quite sharp, to being grainy and soft, as if a closer shot had been created from one that was recorded farther away. Overall, however, the presentation is fully satisfying, and the monophonic sound is fine. There are optional English subtitles and a trailer.

World War II film experts Steve Mitchell and Steven Jay Rubin supply an excellent commentary track, talking about the War in the Pacific, the films about it, how much of **No Man Is an Island** is based upon true events, and how those true events had to be modified to structure a feature film, but they also go into detail about the life and career of Hunter, who died tragically a few years later after an accident on a set for an Italian western. They agree that this is isn't even his best film, but not only is it a terrific film because of his performance, but it is a real mystery based upon his presence here that he wasn't even a bigger movie star than he managed to become.

"He's such an attractive man. Hunter was everything a movie star should be. I'm surprised he didn't get bigger roles but maybe he was just happy with what he was getting."

"It's a little hard to say. You look at his filmography and you see this guy has had a career, but there is something kind of cruel about the 1960s for actors who came up in the Forties and the Fifties, that the Sixties was an interesting period for Hollywood in that the front part of the Sixties felt kind of like the Fifties. It was sort of business as usual for Hollywood at the time, and then as we progressed toward the latter part of the Sixties, Hollywood became about making movies for young people, and so in a few years Hunter was starting to get a little too old to play younger characters."

But what magic he could have worked in a later **Star Trek** film...

Western lore

In an amalgamation of lore from the Old West, Van Heflin stars as 'Jim Bridger' in the 1951 Universal International production, **Tomahawk**, a Universal Kino Lorber Incorporated *KL Studio Classics* Blu-ray (UPC#7383-29262204, \$25). One of the film credits lists an 'Indian consultant,' and the film is more sympathetic to the plight of Native Americans than the common impression people have of westerns during that time (although many such movies—but definitely not all—actually present a more nuanced portrait of indigenous peoples than is acknowledged).

Alex Nicol, looking like he came straight from Hitler's master race, is the film's villain, a cavalry lieutenant with a **Soldier Blue** past who shoots a young Indian boy and then lies about it, so that everyone else thinks the Indians are on the warpath because of their inherent savagery. Heflin's character knows better, but has to balance his desire to sustain the peace with his duty to protect the soldiers in a fort that has been built within Indian territory. Directed by George Sherman, events in the narrative seem to have been compiled from different historical incidents—during a big battle scene, the soldiers surprise the Indians by using new repeat-loading rifles their attackers have never faced before—and the film is bookended with an authoritative narration as if everything is being presented as historical fact. It isn't, but at least it is trying harder than most to convey the true spirit of what occurred during the era.

Yvonne De Carlo co-stars to provide Heflin's character with some pleasant company, and Preston Foster is also featured. Rock Hudson has a small part, too. While presented in the squared full screen format, the outdoor cinematography is often breathtaking, filling the image with sky and relegating the horizon to the bottom fifth or sixth of the screen. While the picture is a little grainy at times and there are small speckles and an occasional scratch here and there, the color transfer is gorgeous, thus making the close-ups of the stars gorgeous as well. De Carlo has a Maria Montez hand-me-down with the bust outlined by different colored fabric, and it pops out all the more (as it did with Montez) because of the lovely color transfer. The monophonic sound is fine and there are optional English subtitles, along with a trailer.

Film historians Lee Gambin and Rutanya Alda (who occasionally has brain freezes when it comes to remembering names) provide a reasonably

good commentary, talking about the disparity between westerns that were supportive of Native American viewpoints and westerns that were ignorant of them, while also going over the backgrounds of the cast and the crew, and sharing bits of the historical events behind the film.

Kung fu comedy

Initially a jokey martial arts movie with some good stunts and so much juvenile humor that only dedicated fans will be willing to sit through it, the 1979 Golden Harvest feature, **Knockabout**, an Arrow Video Blu-ray (UPC#760137120988, \$40), improves so much in its second half that it is worth suffering through the annoyances to get there. Running 104 minutes, the last 40 minutes are so packed full of dazzling, breathless, gymnastic fighting that the goofy slapstick, clownish mugging and silly makeup effects in the first half are completely forgotten or, at least, forgiven. Yuen Biao and Ka-Yan Leung play a pair of wastrel brothers who are beaten up by an aging man they intended to rob and, impressed by his skills, ask to become his students. In the shadows, but not making much of an appearance until the second half, Sammo Hung portrays another beggar who steals their cash whenever they do manage to make a score. Directed by Hung (his first effort), the film has the ostensible structure of a training-and-fight film, with several inspired plot twists that, along with the impressive and exhausting choreography, work so well it is a shame no one tried to take the set up more seriously.

Two versions of the film are presented on the disc, the original *Hong Kong Theatrical Cut*, which runs 105 minutes, and the *International Export Cut*, which runs 93 minutes and is in English only. Not enough has been removed, however, to alter the tone of the film's first half, and the English track is substantially more awkward than the *Hong Kong Theatrical Cut* Cantonese and Mandarin language tracks. The clarity of the monophonic sound is good. However, the *Hong Kong Theatrical Cut* also offers a 5.1-channel track with different English dubbing, which is worth considering not just because the dubbing is better, but because the dimensionality of the environmental sounds and the boost given to the fight sounds and the music make the entire movie more entertaining (and the humor easier to tolerate, at least a little bit).

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1, and the color transfer is also very sharp. Yes, it is so sharp that the comical makeup effects are even more irritating than they would be if the image were softer or discolored, but not only is the cleanliness of the image pleasing, but when the athletics really get underway, the clarity of their exhibition make them all the more remarkable.

Hong Kong film experts Frank Djeng and Michael Worth supply a commentary over the *Hong Kong Cut*, providing background on the filmmakers, explaining the cultural references and gags, analyzing the innovative fighting styles that Hung brought to the film and discussing the movie's blend of action and humor. The commentary is reasonably comprehensive and informative. Over the *International Cut*, Asian film enthusiasts Mike Leeder and Arne Venema supply another commentary that complements the first one effectively. They share stories about working on Hong Kong films, go into detail about Hung's skills and strategies (and contrast and compare him extensively with Jackie Chan), share amusing anecdotes about everything from Hong Kong cuisine to shooting martial arts movies with injuries, and go over the probability that because of the uniquely abusive way they were trained as children, there will probably never be another generation of Hong Kong action performers as uniquely skilled as those who worked in the era when **Knockabout** was made.

Also featured is a trailer; a decent collection of memorabilia in still frame; a good 7-minute interview with Hung about the film and Biao; a fine 7-minute interview with Leung about the film and his career, including an interesting description of how he had to memorize his moves for each shot; an interesting 25-minute interview with martial arts expert Sau-Chung Chan about 'Monkey kung fu' fighting styles; and a 4-minute deleted opening sequence with Biao and Hung doing more amazing gymnastics (in the style of the Shaw Bros. openings) that was used for the film's Japanese release. It has a humorous punchline.

A reliable slasher hook

Although it came late in the cycle—one character even has a cellphone, although it doesn't help him when the danger comes—the 1999 **Lovers Lane** is a reasonably good slasher thriller, which has been released on Blu-ray by Arrow Video (UPC#760137122029, \$40). The story is a little convoluted, but that is only in the spirit of the films it is building upon. Shot in the suburbs of Seattle, the hero's father and the heroine's mother were both murdered by a guy with a hook for a hand while cheating on their respective spouses in a parked car, and now it is a decade-and-a-half later, everyone is a nubile teenager, and the hook guy has escaped from the local asylum. Time to go make out in a car, right?

Running 89 minutes, there is some nudity, the cast is reasonably personable, there are plenty of screams caused by cats running out of closet doors and so on, and there are oodles of blood and gore. It checks off all the boxes so far as we are concerned, which is pretty impressive if you are trying to make the checks with a hook.

Directed by Jon Steven Ward, the cast includes future horror star Anna Faris. The picture can be letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1, but that creates an overly tight framing and the preferred presentation is the original, squared full screen aspect ratio, which is the default offering. The image is fairly grainy at times, but colors are fresh, the image is reasonably sharp, and the cloudy and verdant Pacific Northwest environment is effectively conveyed. The stereo sound brings a mild but viable dimensionality to the musical score and a few environmental sounds. There are optional English subtitles. Along with a trailer, there is a healthy collection of memorabilia in still frame and a sweet 32-minute retrospective documentary with the producers (who also wrote the script), Geof Miller and Rory Veal, and cast members Matt Riedy and Carter Roy, reminiscing about how the film came together and their various experiences during the shoot. Miller and Veal then go into even more detail about everything on a serviceable commentary track, explaining how they made quite a healthy profit just selling the American videotape rights to Blockbuster (which was too behind-the-times to take the DVD rights, too) and then cruising on foreign sales and other ancillary rights (such as the aforementioned DVDs). They go into detail about various things that occurred during the shoot (“Sometimes when you have actors that come from L.A. and actors that are local, they don’t mix because the actors from L.A. by contract have to have a trailer, and the locals don’t have that. So we got a big Winnebago for all of the local actors to hang out in, and we would go back to where they were all parked, we found everybody in the Winnebago, local and L.A., playing games, having fun. They really came together as a team.”), and they share welcome advice to eager budding filmmakers. “If you want to shoot a low budget movie, spend your money on your costumes and your music. The costumes will sell the characters to the audience, and the music will help them know what to feel.”

Gendarmes

Based upon historical incidents surrounding the Dreyfus Affair, which are deftly blended with thriller plot twists and wonderful period detail, the 2021 French television series, **Paris Police 1900**, has been released by Canal+, Kino Lorber and MHz Choice DVD (UPC#738329262044, \$40). Jérémie Laheurte plays a young detective initially investigating the death of a headless female torso found in a suitcase floating the Seine. From there, the story weaves around the detective’s efforts to follow various leads, the contrary efforts of other detectives following different leads, and a tinderbox of political protests surrounding the return of Alfred Dreyfus from Devil’s Island for a retrial. For those who think that anti-Semitism started and stopped with the Nazis, the program is an eye-opener, underscoring not just how pervasive a hatred for the Jews has always been in some communities, but how certain actions that can have the appearance as being random, such as the proliferation of anti-Jewish graffiti, are actually the tips of enormous and unyielding icebergs. Interact with the detective’s story and the story of the anti-Semites who are using the Dreyfus trial to attempt an uprising, is the story of the commissioner of the police, played by Marc Barbé, who is steeped in the confused politics of the era, a little exasperated by his drug-addicted wife feeling abandoned when he takes the job, and has to use every last piece of his wiles to save Paris when the verdict comes in.

While the drama is sufficient to hold a viewer’s attention, it is the exploration of history that really makes the show worthwhile. It depicts everything from the beginnings of a widespread use of the telephone in Paris, to the strategic utilization of bicycles by the police to increase their mobility (they were not yet allowed to carry firearms). It is also a harrowing look at the past. Everybody is nastier than they would be today, basically because life was harder and they couldn’t afford to let their guards down. Even the hero tends to hit first and settle down only when he feels he is in control, even with the woman he meets (who has graduated from law school but is not allowed to be a lawyer because of her gender) and falls for. The show’s atmosphere may not be sufficiently pleasant for some viewers, and you definitely have to concentrate to keep track of who is betraying whom and why, but for those who don’t mind a little dirt under the fingernails of their entertainment, the program is an engrossing experience.

Eight episodes are spread to three platters running a total of 438 minutes. There is no ‘Play All’ option. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The dark and grimy designs lead to occasional smearing, although otherwise the color transfer looks okay. The stereo sound supplies a viable dimensionality. The program is in French with permanent English subtitles and is accompanied by a video streaming trailer.

DVD NEWS

THE END OF AN ERA: Netflix has announced that it will no longer be mailing out DVDs for rental in September, and while the practice will surely continue in local libraries and Redbox kiosks, the event is unquestionably a milestone for streaming, an acknowledgement that those who are not such film fanatics that they want to own their movies are happiest with the most convenient access to them, regardless of playback quality or limits to selection.

CRITERION CORNER: The Criterion Collection is releasing all five Budd Boetticher and Randolph Scott westerns—**The Tall T**, **Decision at Sundown**, **Buchanan Rides Alone**, **Ride Lonesome**, and **Comanche Station**—in 4K format no less, with a six-platter set (three platters with the

films in 4K and three standard Blu-rays with the same films), **The Ranown Westerns: Five Films Directed by Budd Boetticher**, which will also have introductions to the films by Martin Scorsese and Taylor Hackford; an introduction by film critic Farran Smith Nehme on actor Randolph Scott; three commentaries, featuring film scholar Jeanine Basinger on **The Tall T**, film critic Jeremy Arnold on **Ride Lonesome**, and Hackford on **Comanche Station**; archival programs featuring interviews with director Budd Boetticher; an audio conversation with Boetticher and film scholar Jim Kitses; and a Super 8 home-movie version of **Comanche Station**. Carl Franklin’s **Once False Move** will also be released in 4K format and include Franklin’s commentary from 1999 and a fresh conversation between Franklin and Billy Bob Thornton. Scorsese’s **After Dark** is being issued in 4K format as well, with a commentary from 2004 featuring Scorsese, Thelma Schoonmaker, Michael Ballhaus, Griffin Dunne, and Amy Robinson, with additional comments recorded in 2023; an interview with Scorsese by Fran Lebowitz; a documentary about the making of the film featuring Dunne, Robinson, and Schoonmaker; a program about the look of the film featuring costume designer Rita Ryack and production designer Jeffrey Townsend; and deleted scenes. Cheryl Dunye’s **The Watermelon Woman** will have an interview with Dunye; a conversation between Dunye and artist-filmmaker Martine Syms; a conversation between Juhasz and filmmaker and film scholar Thomas Allen Harris; and six early short films by Dunye. Finally, Jean-Luc Godard’s **Breathless** is being released in 4K format, with the special features that were included on the previous Criterion release, including interviews with Godard, Jean-Paul Belmondo, Jean Seberg, Jean-Pierre Melville, Raoul Coutard, assistant director Pierre Rissient and D. A. Pennebaker; Mark Rappaport’s *Jean Seberg*; Jonathan Rosenbaum’s *Breathless as Criticism*; *Chambre 12, Hôtel de Suède*, a 1993 French documentary about the making of **Breathless**, featuring members of the cast and crew; and *Charlotte et son Jules*, a 1959 short film by Godard featuring Belmondo.

NEW IN BLU: The following titles were recently issued on Blu-ray—Shaolin Invincibles/Seven to One (AGFA); Raised on Rock The Burnette Family Legacy (Alchemy Werks); Paying Mr. McGetty (All Channel); Midsomer Murders Season 23, Scare Package II Rad Chad’s Revenge (AMD); Army and Coop, Barun Rai and the House on the Cliff, The Bird of Fire, Cold Wind Blowing, Deception and Lies, The Dreams of Rene Sendam, Emile, The Flying Circus, I Need You Dead, Ouija Experiment (Bayview); A Girl Who Likes a Girl (Bounty); Gina (Canadian); Beautiful Beings, C144 Human X Nature, Mexican Gothic The Films of Carlos Enrique Taboada, Primal Rage (CAV); Bless the Child, Envy, Flashback, The Jackie Chan Collection V.2 (Cinedigm); How to Build a Time Machine (Circle); Terrifier 2 (Coven); Small Axe, Triangle of Sadness (Criterion); The Flesh Merchants (Culture Shock); Infinity Pool (Decal); The Assassin of the Tsar (Deaf Crocodile); Woman of the Photographs (Epic); GoldenEra A Movie about the Game That Defined a Generation (ETR); The Upsetter The Life and Music of Lee Scratch Perry (Factory 25); The Naked Fog/Moonlighting Wives (Film Movement); Baby Oopsie 3 Burn Baby Burn, Sorority Babes in the Slimeball Bowl-O-Rama 2 (Full Moon); Breathless (Fun City); Keane (Grasshopper); Kids vs. Aliens, A Lot of Nothing (Image); Backtrack, The Big Bus, The Big Easy, Film Noir The Dark Side of Cinema XII, Heat, High Wide and Handsome, Lady in a Jam, Man on the Train, The Mississippi Gambler, Moment to Moment, The New Godfathers, Oh Doctor!/Poker Face, Rio, Terminal Invasion, They Came to Cordura, The Trap, The Truth about Spring, Up Down Fragile, You and Me (Kino); Jesus Revolution, Righteous Thieves, Transfusion (Lionsgate); Kompromat (Magnolia); The Thing (Mill Creek); Confess Fletch (Miramax); Nitro (MPI); Accion Mutante, Amnesia, The Assassination Bureau, Calamity of Snakes, Gorgeous, Heart of Dragon, The Green Hornet, Lovers Lane, Police Story III Super Cop, The Sunday Woman, Wings of Disaster The Birdemic Trilogy (MVD); Poser (Oscilloscope); Cheers Complete Series, The Fighter, The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie, Star Trek Lower Decks Season 3 (Paramount); Shiver of the Vampires, Two Orphan Vampires (Powerhouse); Bulletproof Monk, The Crocodile Hunter Collision Course, The Fantasticks, Kid Galahad, The Quiet American, Stanley & Iris, Year of the Comet (Sandpiper); Guilty Pleasures (Saturn’s Core); Living, One Fine Morning, Return to Seoul (Sony); Swamp Lion (1091); The Collective Movie (Trialside); Nightmares (Umbrella); Cocaine Bear, Devil’s Peak, Marlowe (Universal); Meet Me in the Bathroom (Utopia); Maybe I Do (Vertical); His Dark Materials Season 3, Gendy Tartakovsky’s Primal Season 2, Hour of the Gun, Justice League X RWBY Super Heroes & Huntsmen V.1, Kings Go Forth, A Lion Is in the Streets, Magic Mike’s Last Dance, One Way Passage, Revolt at Fort Laramie, Safe in Hell, Storm Warning, The Strawberry Blonde, The Way West (Warner); Hypochondriac (XYZ); Calvaire, Living with Chucky (Yellow Veil)

NEW IN 4K: The following titles were recently issued in 4K format—Freeway II Confessions of a Trickbaby, Primal Rage (CAV); The Haunting of Julia, Midnight Run (Cinedigm); Terrifier 2 (Coven); The Fisher King, The Seventh Seal, Triangle of Sadness (Criterion); Serpico, 12 Angry Men (Kino); Accion Mutante, Police Story 3 Super Cop (MVD); Flashdance, Star Trek VII Generations, Star Trek VIII First Contact, Star Trek IX Insurrection, Star Trek X Nemesis (Paramount); The Shiver of the Vampires, Two Orphan Vampires (Powerhouse); All Star Superman, Cool Hand Luke, Justice League X RWBY Super Heroes & Huntsmen V.1, The Maltese Falcon, Rebel without a Cause (Warner)

