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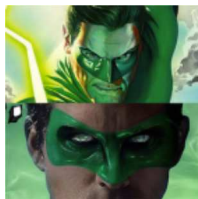
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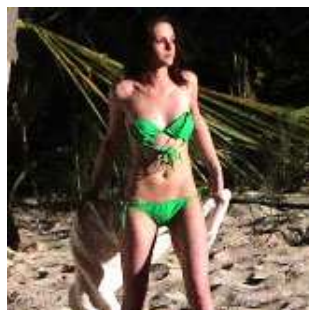


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DVD Review: African Cats, Monte Carlo, Wrong Turn 4 and Thankskilling

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In a business that frequently has the tendency to disproportionately celebrate the contributions only of above-the-line talent, a big part of the allure of something like “African Cats” lies in its below-the-line artisans. An engaging, gorgeously photographed nature documentary that puts audiences on Kenyan plains in stunning fashion amidst its title subjects, this Disneynature title only stumbles in its willful insistence on imposing a family-friendly narrative on footage that is more than capable on its own, with less artificial constraints.



What does that mean, straight to the point? Less, or none, of Samuel L. Jackson's narration, dripping as it is with exaggerated tones that needlessly attempt to dictate mood. Granted, he's given a lot of awkward dialogue with which to work, but less evidence of human tinkering would have been more effective here. The movie's story focuses predominantly on two animal families, intercutting their separate stories of hunting and survival. One strand follows Sita, a fearless and cunning cheetah raising five newborn cubs as a single mother. The other follows a large pride of lionesses, including cub Mara, who live and travel under the protection of Fang, a broken-toothed old lion. When the receding river waters allow for the encroachment from the north of a would-be rival, Kali, along with his four sons, it seems like Fang's days of supremacy are numbered. The film's incredible visual intimacy is its chief selling point, affording viewers a chance to get up close and personal with animals in a way that even zoo exhibits do not allow.

Arriving on Blu-ray in a standard snap-shut case housed in turn in an embossed cardboard slipcover, "African Cats" is presented on an AVC-encoded dual-layer disc, in 1.78:1 widescreen. Its crystal-clear video transfer is utterly superb, with no artifacting or edge enhancement, and no minor hiccuping or delay in even the fastest cheetah chase sequences. A DTS-HD master audio track spreads the bulk of its action across the front channels, but also takes advantage of its range in moments of atmospheric pause. A nice picture-in-picture feature pairs production trivia with information about the animals themselves, and there are also video annotations that spin off into much deeper topical explorations. A music video of Jordin Sparks' "The World I Knew" (a tune which closes the movie) accompanies two brief featurettes, one of which spotlights Disney's commitment to conservation and nature through its DisneyNature line and one of which looks at the special land-lease program being used to bridge a migratory divide between two of Africa's largest wildlife preserves.



A fanciful teen travelogue with the requisite number of tall dark strangers, “Monte Carlo” charts a small town Texas girl’s travels through Europe after her high school graduation, where she ironically finds herself by assuming another person’s identity. More than a bit silly and contrived, but so agreeably cast and well executed as to mitigate these shortcomings for the core demographic at which it is pitched, the movie is a pleasant slice of re-worked, tween-targeted entertainment — diverging wildly from its source material, a novel by Jules Bass — that should receive welcome embrace from fans of “The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants,” as well as their younger siblings.

Selena Gomez stars as good-girl Grace, a sensible valedictorian who’s saved up money for years for this special post-graduation trip with her sassy friend Emma (Katie Cassidy). She’s bummed when her parents (Andie MacDowell and Brett Cullen) force her newly minted, wet-blanket older stepsister Meg (Leighton Meester) upon her, but vows to make the best of it. Her package tour, however, turns out to be a rushed, bargain-basement affair, and unsatisfying on all fronts. When the girls get separated from the rest of their group, it seems like a disaster, but soon Grace is mistaken for snooty young heiress and tabloid queen Cordelia Scott (Gomez again), which affords the gals an evening in a huge Paris hotel suite, and then an all-expense paid trip to the title city. While Grace struggles to keep up the charade in the presence of a member of Cordelia’s family, she and the other girls also meet various boys who make their hearts soar, and offer up fresh complications.

Gorgeous production design and superb costuming and girlie accoutrements help float this improbably romantic adventure and lend it an airy grace, as does a score from composer Michael Giacchino that classily evokes swirling romance without hitting antecedent influences right on the nose. The story is fairly boilerplate, and could certainly do without a story strand involving Emma’s in-pursuit boyfriend Owen (Cory Monteith), who travels across the Atlantic in an improbably flighty quest for romantic reconciliation. Still, Gomez, Cassidy and Meester have a nice rapport, and the locations are nice as well. There are far, far worse ways to while away a family movie night.

“Monte Carlo” comes to Blu-ray on a BD-50 disc presented in 1.85:1 anamorphic widescreen, with a six-channel, DTS-HD audio track that ably captures plenty of bustling, chirpy street life in the movie’s outdoor sequences, but otherwise focuses more straightforwardly on dialogue and music. Seven minutes of deleted scenes include a bit more material with the “real” Cordelia that’s kind of amusing,

plus a quintet of featurettes, none longer than six minutes, focusing on the cast, fashion, physical backdrops and other elements of production. The film's trailer, a quiz that matches viewers to a character from "Monte Carlo" and BD-Live capability round things out, along with a digital copy disc of the movie.

On the documentary front, "Imagine It!" is a breathlessly paced, 52-minute look at various global challenges which evokes John F. Kennedy's famous 1962 Rice University "man on the moon" speech in an attempt to trigger ambition in particularly the fields of science and engineering, and connect those disciplines with left-brain creativity and imagination. Written by Richard Tavener and directed by Rudy Poe, the film has the benefit (or detriment, depending on how one judges it) of being hosted by Iliza Shlesinger (a comedienne who also currently does duty the syndicated dating show "Excused"), who serves as a kind of energetic ringmaster, cracking her whip of comparative boosterism in various interstitial bits seeded throughout the movie. The academic talking heads that appear, however, are an engaging lot, inclusive of author Ray Kurzweil, astronaut Sally Ride and professor Ken Robinson. The latter speaks eloquently about art developing our sense of aesthetics, and he and others lend credence to the simple but powerful notion that we need innovation to manage the rates of change, since that is the only constant on the landscape of humankind.

"Imagine It!" comes to DVD on a region-free disc, housed in a regular plastic Amaray case with a snap-release center button. DVD bonus features consist of a week-long experiment involving students from all over the world in which groups are tasked with trying to add "value" (in any of its several definitions) to a packet of Post-It notes. It's an offbeat little featurette, and certainly interesting to see the various things that groups come up with. For more information, visit www.ImagineItProject.com.



Halloween and the month of October is most frequently associated with horror, but the chill of autumn more broadly is actually quite conducive to small screen horror. Among the genre titles recently hitting shelves is "Wrong Turn 4: Bloody Beginnings," a look back at the narrative roots of the grisly series for those who simply can't get enough of their favorite West Virginia hillbilly cannibals. The film opens in 1974, and shows three hideously deformed, in-bred hicks — One-Eye, Saw Tooth and Three-Finger — going on a killing spree at Glenville Sanatorium. Years later, a group of college kids (Jenny Pudavick, Victor Zinck, Kaitlyn Wong, Tenika Davis and Dean Armstrong) get waylaid in a snowstorm during a snowmobile jaunt, and hole up in said (seemingly) abandoned building. Naturally, mugs of hot cocoa and games of Tiddlywinks do not ensue.

Director Declan O'Brien does a good job of keeping the pacing crisp and tight here, and the convincing qualities of his setting help maximize resources and sell the material. The acting isn't great, but the screenplay pays the piper of genre convention, and works in wheelchair racing, lesbian

canoodling/nudity, gore aplenty and a nice little twist ending. There's nothing here that deeply merits a general audience look, but horror fans and especially fans of the franchise will be entertained for sure.

Housed in a regular plastic Amaray case in turn stored in an evocative cardboard slipcover, the unrated cut of "Wrong Turn 4" comes to DVD presented on a dual layer disc, in 1.78:1 widescreen. Audio arrives by way of a Dolby digital 5.1 track, with optional English SDH, Spanish and French subtitles. An engaging feature-length audio commentary track from O'Brien covers all sorts of production minutiae and anecdotes, and there are also 18 minutes of deleted scenes. Eight minutes of discretely edited webisodes, culled from on-set footage shot mostly by O'Brien and his first AD, provide little snapshots from life during production; there's O'Brien feeding a bird that lands on his hand, and the cast talking about the quite real sub-zero temperatures encountered on location. A 13-minute making-of featurette includes clips, plus interview footage from the cast and behind-the-scenes players, like special effects supervisor Doug Morrow and producer Kim Todd, the latter of whom talks about her delight in locating the building at which they shot, a real-life condemned medical facility built in 1910. Rounding things out is a music video from the Blackout City Kids.

If movies could garner theatrical release based solely on the effectiveness of their home video cover art then "Vlog," written and directed by Joshua Butler, would certainly earn a call-up to the big leagues. Both its most salient image — of a blood-splattered web cam, casually evoking an eyeball — and its central conceit are fantastic. Unfortunately, after a promising beginning, the film largely fails to deliver the goods.

Billed as "a merciless wake-up call for the viral video generation," the movie's story centers on a sexy younger video blogger (hence the title), Brooke Marks (playing a same-named character), who records and posts online her thoughts on anything and everything in her life. "Vlog" was apparently birthed as a series of these internet hors d'oeuvres, and they represent the film's first act. In her bouncy, blithe style, Brooke sports low-cut tops and waxes about guys she meets, and jealous girlfriends. When she goes out, she takes her little webcam with her, and records certain events surreptitiously. One dude (Trevor Troutman) is especially wrecked when she shoots him down, setting the scene for murder and mystery.

"Vlog" has a good set-up, and pin-up model Marks projects (embodies, perhaps?) just the right sort of alluring vapidness for the role. But in its second and third acts the movie bogs down, and then falls victim to Butler's pursuit of grand stylistic statement. Reach exceeds grasp here, by about three-fold. "Vlog" tickles the brain a bit, but its story abandons interesting avenues of psychological exploration in favor of more yawningly familiar cheap thrills. The result is a missed opportunity, in a big way. The movie hits DVD in 1.78:1 anamorphic widescreen with a Dolby digital 5.1 audio track, housed in a regular plastic Amaray case with that aforementioned awesome cover art. Optional English SDH are included, as well as the discrete, stand-alone edits of Marks' vlogs that initially appeared online.

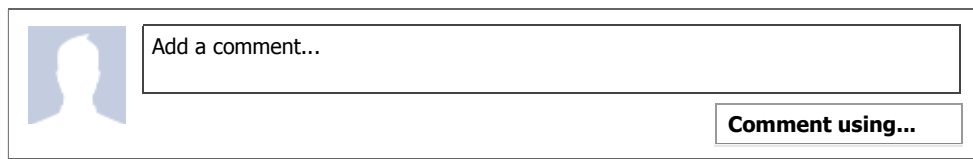


If videostores still had a grip on teenage weekends, then “Thankskilling” would be the type of shlocky flick, cross-filed in the “horror/camp” sub-section, that would pry dollars from the wallets of snickering guy cinephiles when the store was about to close, and they needed one more movie to complete their late-night binge. A streamlined, 66-minute, super-low-budget, comedic-minded send-up of imperiled-partying-teens holiday fare like “Black Christmas,” “Silent Night, Deadly Night,” “Spring Break Massacre” and “Killer Summer,” the film focuses on a quintet of archetypical kids (jock, nerd, slut, good girl and oafish redneck) who make a drive home across rural Ohio for Thanksgiving break, and then find themselves in the crosshairs of a supernatural killer turkey, who totes a shotgun, wears disguises and yells one-liners (“You just got stuffed!”) as he dispenses with his victims.

“Boobs in the first second!” touts/warns the DVD cover box (actually, it’s the 45-second mark, if you count the opening credit text), which will probably account, in nudging fashion, for about a quarter of all curious rentals. But “Thankskilling” isn’t so much a sexploitation flick or horror hound’s dream as it is a kind of post-modern spoof of these types of terrible 1980s straight-to-VHS genre exercises. The special effects and make-up, by Troy Smith, is sort of slapdash, and the acting is notably terrible. Multiple references to the Jon Benet Ramsey case date the movie (it was shot in 2007), and its copious puns are of the groaning, so-bad-we-hope-you-think-it’s-good variety. Still, if you’re looking to enliven a staid family gathering this coming week, this would certainly be one way to do it.

Housed in a regular plastic Amaray case, “Thankskilling” comes to DVD on a region-free disc, presented in 1.78:1 widescreen. Director Jordan Downey and co-writer and producer Kevin Stewart sit for a candid feature-length audio commentary track, talking about their \$3,500 budget, how they recruited porn star Wanda Lust for the movie’s historical cold open (Craigslist, don’tcha know), and the importance of a Wendy’s Junior Bacon Cheeseburger when trying to get a dog to do what you want for a shot. There are 16 chapter stops, as well as a six-minute blooper reel, a fan-created song, and a one-minute montage reel of fan-created art, which could well be drawings by Downey and Stewart’s nephews and nieces, based on the look of them. For more information, visit www.ThankskillingMovie.com.

Written by: Brent Simon



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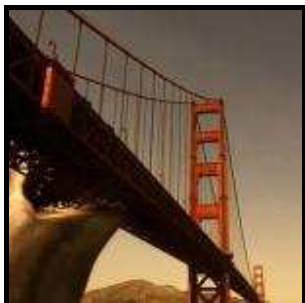
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