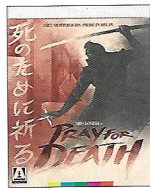


## Pray for Death ★★1/2

Arrow, 92 min., R, Blu-ray: \$29.95

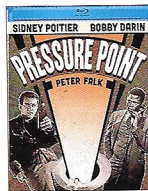
During the 1980s vogue for ninja movies, Shō Kosugi, who had been living in the U.S. for more than a decade, showed off his martial arts skills in a series that included this 1985 starring vehicle directed by Gordon Hessler. Kosugi plays Akira, a man who was once a member of a secret army of "black ninjas" but then abandoned a life of violence for one of domesticity. Akira moves to Los Angeles with his wife and two young sons in hopes of opening a restaurant, but the family meets with immediate hostility from locals, including mobsters looking to retrieve a valuable necklace that they believe Akira is hiding. When Akira's loved ones are threatened, it's inevitable that he will give up his passivity and deal with the gangsters using the fighting techniques he mastered long ago. While this is hardly an imaginative plot, Hessler paints an impressively grim picture of the unwelcoming California community, and Kosugi demonstrates some remarkable moves in prolonged action sequences that are adroitly choreographed and filmed. This Blu-ray debut includes both an excellent remaster of the original R-rated theatrical release, as well as a bonus unrated version (with a few minutes of additional gore, although the extra scenes are not restored). Other extras include interviews (one archival, the other new) with Kosugi. A strong optional purchase. (F. Swietek)



## Pressure Point ★★1/2

Olive, 89 min., not rated, Blu-ray: \$29.95

Sidney Poitier is a veteran psychiatrist who helps a frustrated younger colleague (played with animated gusto by Peter Falk) with a difficult patient by sharing a story from his own past in this 1962 drama. As a young psychiatrist working in a federal penitentiary in 1942, Poitier's character (the characters are unnamed) was assigned to the case of an angry white supremacist (Bobby Darin) convicted of sedition for his hate speech and pro-Hitler leanings. The young man can't sleep, is haunted by nightmares, and he takes his anger out on the psychiatrist with jibes and insults. But with the encouragement of his boss, the psychiatrist perseveres and helps the inmate through his problems. Or, some of them, anyway. *Pressure Point* is a true psychological drama, taking place almost entirely in the therapy sessions, taking a Freudian approach to psychological trauma. Filmmaker Hubert Cornfield dramatizes the bigot's memories in highly stylized fashion—not flashbacks so much as experiences etched into his mind that are presented in an expressionist manner with minimalist sets and theatrical lighting. One of the many films of the era that con-

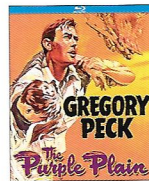


fronted issues of racism and bigotry, *Pressure Point* approaches the topic with seriousness and integrity, but it is also heavy-handed and comes across as somewhat simplistic when viewed from our contemporary perspective. But Poitier brings a strength and dignity to the role, and Barry Gordon also shines (playing Darin's character in his memories). A strong optional purchase. (S. Axmaker)

## The Purple Plain ★★★

Kino Lorber, 100 min., not rated, Blu-ray: \$29.95

Gregory Peck is a stalwart hero in Robert Parrish's 1954 World War II survival tale. Peck stars as Forrester, a Canadian pilot serving in the RAF in Burma. He's known for recklessness, and indeed harbors a death wish, unable to come to terms with the loss of his wife during a German raid on London. But when Forrester is assigned to fly an officer over dangerous territory and the plane is brought down by enemy fire, he's faced with the task of carrying his severely wounded navigator over miles of rugged territory to safety, all the while having to put up with the endless complaints of the plane's passenger, Blore (Maurice Denham), who insists that they abandon the injured man, and eventually sneaks off on his own—leaving Forrester to try to save his comrade by himself. *The Purple Plain* also features a romantic subplot centered on Forrester's dalliance with a lovely native girl who has revived his desire to live, but the meat of the tale lies in the long slog toward a river that offers hope of survival, and here Peck brings his customarily steely resolve to his character's determination to leave no man behind. Shot on location by Oscar-winning cinematographer Geoffrey Unsworth, *The Purple Plain* sometimes feels like an ordeal for viewers, but it's a solid, realistic tale of heroism under extreme pressure. Recommended. (F. Swietek)



## Serial ★1/2

Olive, 93 min., R, DVD: \$24.99, Blu-ray: \$29.99

Not to be confused with the addictive podcast of the same name, Bill Persky's 1980 comedy *Serial* is ostensibly a social satire of late 1970s culture centered on affluent suburbanites who are getting in touch with their feelings, turning vegetarian, and espousing pop therapy clichés. Set in the thoroughly white suburbs of Marin County, it stars Martin Mull as a white-collar executive with a red meat sensibility, with Tuesday Weld costarring as his vegetarian wife, who becomes increasingly frustrated with her husband's sneering attitude toward her consciousness-raising interests. They separate and try out different lifestyles while their teenage

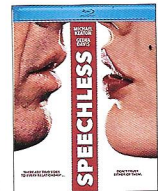


daughter runs away to join a cult. The film takes swipes at therapy, environmentalism, free love, rampant divorce, and the hypocrisy of being more concerned with appearances than meaningful action, but it is more broadside spoof than satire and Mull's ostensible voice of reason is as much a hypocrite as any of the figures of ridicule, among them Tom Smothers as a new-age guru and Peter Bonerz as a clueless therapist. *Serial* has dated badly, although it does feature the late cult horror actor Christopher Lee in one of the most unusual roles of his career as a high-powered executive who spends his weekends as a gay biker gang leader. Not recommended. (S. Axmaker)

## Speechless ★★

Olive, 99 min., PG-13, Blu-ray: \$29.95

Michael Keaton and Geena Davis star in this harmless but unmemorable romantic comedy as speechwriters for opposing candidates in a statewide election in New Mexico. She's an idealist with a flawed underdog candidate, while he's a former sitcom writer hired to punch up the speeches of the glib frontrunner. They meet over a bottle of sleeping pills in the hotel drugstore on a sleepless night, and are—of course—instant soul mates, bantering about politics and pop culture, even after they discover that they are working for opposing campaigns. The usual complications arise: her former fiancée (a charming but egotistical combat reporter played by Christopher Reeve) shows up, while his boss just happens to be his ex-wife (when a leak causes a scandal, he's convinced that she betrayed him). The political dirty tricks are decidedly mild in this supposedly hardball campaign and the cynicism is too generic to carry much weight. Ron Underwood directs with a soft touch, but while the leads are amiable, the film itself lacks much in the way of engaging personality. Watch for cameos by comedian Steven Wright and Spinal Tap member Harry Shearer as sitcom stars who appear in a campaign spot. Optional. (S. Axmaker)



## Spies ★★★1/2

Kino Lorber, 150 min., not rated, DVD: \$24.95, Blu-ray: \$29.95

Fritz Lang's adrenaline-driven 1928 thriller harkens back to the cliffhanger fun of early 1920s adventure serials while also looking forward to James Bond-style international espionage adventure. A super spy and financial mastermind with the ominous name of Haghi runs a spy network under the cover of a bank; his secret headquarters are literally located beneath the foundation of his public bank. A master of disguise, Haghi controls a vast

