

Altered states

All the time that **Split**, from Universal (UPC#025192387517, \$30), is playing, you're thinking Oscars. Not necessarily for the movie, but definitely for James McAvoy, who plays the multi-personality villain, abducting three teenage girls and holding them in some sort of basement complex as his different selves sort of argue about what to do with them. Betty Buckley, as the psychiatrist treating one of his personalities, would also be worthy of a Supporting nomination, and while the girls are too young to be taken seriously on that level, all three, Anya Taylor-Joy, Haley Lu Richardson and Jessica Sula, give excellent performances. Superbly composed, M. Night Shyamalan's script is literate and talky, and yet, thanks to his masterful direction, highly suspenseful and a greatly enjoyable, from beginning to end. And then there is an epilog in which the dreams of Oscar disappear in a whiff. Don't get us wrong, we absolutely love the epilog, for reasons that cannot be shared without spoiling everything, but it certifies that the film has different ambitions and a different agenda. If there is any fairness in the world, McAvoy will still get a nomination—because he certainly deserves it—but Shyamalan isn't interested in the 117-minute film's artistic value, isn't interested in how, with just a few tweaks, the film could be a fantastic stage piece (there are very slight touches of the supernatural that could easily be eliminated), and he isn't interested in remaining in the failed filmmaker ghetto where he has deservedly labored for quite some time. He wants a franchise, and we hope above all hopes that he gets his wish, even if that very desire robs the film of its integrity and apparent artistic brilliance. Hence, the marvelous 2017 horror film lives up to its own title, delivering two entirely different personalities integrated seamlessly in one cinematic entity.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. Some of the film takes place in the dark, but the image is always clear (the movie also has a 'PG-13' rating, smartly keeping the violence in the viewer's mind rather than on the screen). The 5.1-channel Dolby Digital sound has a strong dimensionality that adds to the thrills. There is an audio track that describes the action ("Casey's eyes flutter open. She follows the other teens' anxious gazes across the room. Wearing a windbreaker and sweatpants, the kidnapper with a buzz cut sits in the doorway staring at them. Casey jolts upright. The man wears a plastered smile."), alternate French and Spanish audio tracks, optional English, French and Spanish subtitles, and 19 minutes of good production featurettes. Also featured are 28 minutes of deleted scenes and a brief alternate ending, each introduced by Shyamalan. The scenes were sensibly removed, but are richly conceived and worth viewing, with the added bonus of understanding Shyamalan's thought process for creating the feature and then trimming it down to what it had to be.

Howard/Brown/Hanks thriller

Despite its title, the Ron Howard 2016 adaptation of a third Dan Brown novel with Tom Hanks as the historian and puzzle-solving protagonist, **Inferno**, a Sony Pictures Home Entertainment release (UPC#043396471191, \$20), has nothing whatsoever to do with the supernatural, beyond a few teasing dream sequences. The film is unrelated to the other Howard/Brown/Hanks features, **The Da Vinci Code** (Dec 08) and **Angels & Demons** (Jan 10), but has the same appeal, establishing a rip-roaring pace that starts out grabbing you by the collar and then whisks you along for the entire 121-minute running time, combining that with gorgeous location footage from some of Europe's greatest tourist spots—in this case, primarily Florence, Venice and Istanbul—and touristy references to classical culture—in this case much of it related to the writings of Dante Alighieri. Once you step back and actually analyze the story, it is pretty stupid, but that doesn't happen until after the last breathless beat of excitement, and by then, who really cares? Even in multiple viewings when you are aware of some of the twists and turns, the film's pacing is so adept that it is easy enough just to get swept up in the whole thing all over again.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The colors transfer gives the locales a slick and glossy appearance that make them look classier than they are in real life. Even among blockbuster DVD releases, the picture transfer is impressive. The 5.1-channel Dolby Digital sound has plenty of enjoyable separation effects and a decent amount of power. There is an audio track that describes the action ("She shoots him. Watching, Langdon winces. Brooks locks the door to the room. Bullets dent the metal door. Langdon collapses out of his bed, accidentally pulling the IV tube from the hanging bag. The brunette kicks the locked door. Blood flows down the IV tube still stuck to Langdon's wrist."), optional English and Spanish subtitles, 46 minutes of decent promotional featurettes, and 27 minutes of enjoyable extended and deleted scenes. While the footage would have upset the pace of the film—which is the film's most critical component—it is highly satisfying when revisited after the film is over, essentially expanding small moments of character and atmosphere.

All's fair

Dreamboat Brad Pitt stars as an espionage agent who brings back his French contact after a mission during World War II and marries her in **Allied**, a Paramount release (UPC#032429263056, \$23). Marion Cotillard co-stars. Directed by Robert Zemeckis, the 2016 film is an action adventure,

an intrigue and very much a romance, and for a while it is wonderful, with everything you could want in a movie, right down to the dashing movie stars. But, the story writes itself into a corner, and while you keep hoping for a brilliant twist, what the filmmakers are hoping for is that you'll be satisfied with most of the 124-minute feature and accepting of the fact that this was the only path the story could take. Hence, the film is burdened with inevitability and is as likely to leave you feeling in the dumps as it is to leave you in the mood for a little candlelight and soft music.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The cinematography is smooth and glossy, and the period film takes full advantage of modern effects to sell its setting. The 5.1-channel Dolby Digital sound has strong dimensional effects. There is an audio track that describes the action ("Max joins the others on the lawn in gazing upward, where a damaged bomber plane streaks across the sky. It makes a wide arc, turning toward the neighborhood. As the flaming aircraft dives straight toward the house, Max shifts tentatively, keeping his eyes on the approaching plane, before dashing inside."), alternate French and Spanish audio tracks, and optional English, French, Spanish and Portuguese subtitles.

WWI adventure

During World War I, an Austrian general steps away from his unit to relieve himself and is captured by an Italian soldier trying to make it back to his own lines in the 1967 MGM Italian co-production, **The Girl and the General**, a Warner Home Video *Archive Collection* release (UPC#8885744-22165, \$22). Rod Steiger portrays the general, Umberto Orsini is the soldier, and Verna Lisi is a struggling peasant who knows the countryside and agrees to help the soldier for half the reward. Running 103 minutes, the film plays as if a third of it had been chopped out, with the narrative advancing suddenly from one situation or story point to the next. The film was directed by Pasquale Festa Campanile and is reasonably enjoyable as it goes along, with an inevitable conclusion that is a bit of downer and takes some of the shine off of the entertainment. For the most part, the performances are enjoyable and the individual challenges that the characters face are engaging.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The color transfer looks reasonably good, with accurate fleshtones and minimal wear. The dubbing isn't bad—it's Steiger's voice—and the monophonic sound mix is reasonably strong. Ennio Morricone did the score. There is no captioning.

Immortal scares

We have always felt an unnatural unease around large, billowing things, such as trash bags, ever since we were traumatized as a child watching **Caliki: The Immortal Monster**, a 1959 Italian horror feature that has now been released on DVD & Blu-ray with a lovely transfer and a billowing trash bag's worth of special features by Arrow Video (UPC#760137985884, \$40). Braving our trepidations, we were delighted to discover that the 76-minute film is indeed smartly constructed, so that while it is a cheap horror flick that may not be using trash bags for its monster (it was mostly cow innards), the film varies the nature of its thrills quite effectively. Although the monster murders several people horribly when the archeologists looking for Incan gold first discover it (shot in Italy, the film is set rather believably in 'Mexico'), one archeologist gets away with just his arm poisoned. This, however, drives him insane, so that in the film's grand finale, the hero archeologist's wife and vulnerable child—maybe a little younger than we were at the time we first saw the film, but not much—are not only threatened by the ever growing 'sample' the stupid hero archeologist brought home and let grow in his basement laboratory, but also by the now insane murderer archeologist, who had the hots for the wife before and now just wants to do with her whatever it is that insane murderer archeologists want to do with attractive women. Perhaps inspired by H.P. Lovecraft, the film is shot efficiently, so that while the monster may look a bit hokey, the editing sustains the suspense and ethereal danger. With the film rushing forward from one story point and location to the next, it accomplishes exactly what it intends to accomplish, scaring innocent children for decades who have accidentally turned to the wrong channel. Or now, put in the wrong Blu-ray.

Officially directed by Riccardo Freda, Mario Bava collaborated on the script, worked on the cinematography and created the special effects, and when Freda was pushed out before the film was completed, Bava also took over the direction, without credit. John Merivale stars, with Didi Sullivan and Gerard Haerter.

The crisp and pretty much spotless black-and-white picture has been letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.66:1. It looks super, but for those who want to see every last special effect available to be seen, a full 1.33:1 rendition of the film is also offered. It has a bit more speckling in spots, but is generally in fine shape, with a compositional dynamic that seems just as valid as the letterboxed version. At the very least, it offers an excuse to watch the film one more glorious time, if your nerves can take it. The monophonic sound is strong and clear. There is an English language track, as well as an Italian track, with optional English subtitles. The film's credits are also in Italian (a 2-minute version of the American opening credits is available as a special feature), and the full screen version is in Italian only, with the English subtitles. Aficionados prefer the Italian audio track, which blends more consistently with the tone of the drama, but as awkward as the English dubbing sometimes is, it has a compelling nostalgia that is difficult to resist.

A trailer is included, along with a half-minute introduction to the movie, a good 22-minute summary of the film's production history, a 19-minute remembrance of Freda by critic Stefano Della Casa, and a very good 18-minute analysis of the film's artistic strengths and how centrally it is placed in the history of science-fiction and horror films, not just in Italy but throughout the world.

The program also had two separate commentary tracks by competing Bava experts, Tim Lucas and Troy Howarth. Both provide informative details about the film, the cast and the filmmakers, but Lucas tends to provide more interesting details and demonstrates a greater knowledge of how the film was executed, while Howarth tends to favor a more generalized approach. See for yourself how the two walk you through the film's opening moments.

Howarth: "This opening sequence we're looking at is a very good showcase for Bava's skill as a technician and as a master of atmosphere. It was entirely filmed in Italy, this film, but through the use of matte paintings, which Bava almost certainly painted by himself or created by himself, he is able to create a credible illusion of a Mexican jungle. It's very exotic looking, it's very atmospheric, it's very moody. It's not necessarily terribly realistic. Realism was never really the name of the game as far as Bava was concerned. [He] definitely embraced artifice, and you can see that in this film, where this background shot of the miniature volcano erupting has something decidedly a little bit fake looking about it, a little bit phony about it, but I don't mean that in a critical way, or in a way to put it down. It's very handcrafted, it's very charming, and that's part of the appeal of this film that we'll see as it unfolds is that this is a very handcrafted movie. It's the type of movie where you're aware of the fact that you're seeing something that obviously isn't really occurring in reality, as it were, but nevertheless, because it is being presented in this sort of richly stylized manner, it's actually very endearing and very engaging. As was very often the case, Bava had very little time and even less money to work with, and with his tremendous facility with special effects at his disposal, he was able to create something that looks a great deal richer than it really was."

Lucas: "We open with a dazzling succession of trick shots supervised by **Caltiki's** cameraman and co-director, Mario Bava. The ruins of the ancient Mayan city were likely shot on the exterior grounds of [an Italian film studio], where the natural, open-skied scenery was augmented with Mayan totems clipped out of the pages of National Geographic magazines and then mounted onto one or more panes of glass. This is another glass shot, but one that involves not only clippings, but also painting on the glass, as well as various three-dimensional objects worked into the composition—miniatures, knick-knacks, various pieces of flora—all positioned in front of a brooding, even primordial studio cyclorama. Judging from the hole in its back, this panther-like sculpture appears to have been an ordinary household planter. Now Bava offers a fuller view of the collage, framing an active volcano at its rear. As it begins to smoke, we cut to a closer set up, again viewed through glass, this time with an idol pasted at screen left, with some foregrounded plant fronds. The camera must have been inverted for this shot, because that's not smoke we're seeing, but rather a cloud tank effect, an old camera trick that began to be noticed around the time of **Citizen Kane**. Such monstrous smoke effects were achieved by dumping leaded powder into an aquarium, and it was given added violence here by firing light through it, which was then flickered by hand and superimposed with fireworks."

3D musical

The daughters of a slain publisher travel to the Yukon before they learn that he has been killed, and the publisher's nemesis, a saloon owner played by Gene Barry, falls for their allure in the jumbled romantic adventure comedy, **Those Redheads from Seattle**, a 1953 Paramount production that is pretty much of interest only because it was shot in 3D, and has been released in that format by Paramount and Kino Lorber Associates as a *KL Studio Classics* Blu-ray (UPC#738329211592, \$35). Rhonda Fleming and Teresa Brewer play two of the daughters, and the dependable Agnes Moorhead is their mother. The singing duo, The Bell Sisters, play the other two daughters. The most interesting piece of casting is the Fifties pop singer, Brewer, who only appeared in this one feature film, making it pretty much the only preserved opportunity to see how her charms extended beyond her cutesy voice (she's not bad in the part). The plot is so messy that the writers can't really decide who is going to hook up with whom, and while the individual beats carry you through the 90-minute feature (with an Intermission), it is obvious that the film is a piece of tacked-together entertainment, with generally bland songs (it's also a musical) and secondary movie stars. But, yes, the 3D effects make it all worthwhile. There is a terrific set up that is used several times in which the saloon office has windows looking out over the audience and the stage beyond, so that there is activity on the stage, in the audience and in the office, each on its own plane. A few things get tossed and wiggled at the camera, but the fun of the 3D is primarily in the character blocking and the set decorations. Basically, there are precisely so few 3D films that while the feature is pretty much worthless in 2D, it is a valuable classic when it comes to the glorious nostalgia and dimensional exploration that older 3D movies have to offer.

Both the 2D and the 3D versions are available on the disc. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.66:1. The color transfer looks lovely. The image is spotless, and hues are accurate and finely detailed (in 2D, the age and weakness of the image is more readily apparent, although it still looks quite nice). The DTS sound is also very enjoyable. The film's original stereo mix is lost, but a reconstituted three-channel mix is offered that brings an accompanying dimensionality to the music and an aural sense of theater to the staging, although directional effects are limited. There is no captioning. Along with a trailer, there is a great 8-minute interview with Fleming at a screening of the film in 2006 (she says that she was a completely different 'type' in color than she was in her 'meatier' black-and-white roles), and a good 5-minute piece on the restoration that the film underwent, which was extravagant given the generally limited interest the film is likely to generate, even in 3D. That is why, despite the slightly faded colors at times and a few other minor weaknesses, the presentation as a whole is highly commendable.

A terrific commentary track has also been included, featuring 3D experts Hillary Hess, Greg Kintz, Jack Theakston and Bob Furmanek. They give a complete history of the film's production and the backgrounds of its creators and stars, but they also talk extensively about the 3D craze and how different studios—and in this case, specifically Paramount—responded to the briefly flowering market. They speak as well about the specific problems that were encountered restoring the film, as were summarized in the featurette, and they talk about the artistic integrity and design of the effects, which are consistently pleasing.

Identity theft

Paul Henreid plays a gangster on the run who discovers a doppelganger with one exception—a scar on his cheek—and schemes to take the man's place in **The Scar**, a Paramount Kino Lorber Incorporated *KL Studio Classics* Blu-ray (UPC#738329211332, \$30). The striking and efficient (hiding cheap sets in shadows) black-and-white cinematography on the 1945 feature was done by John Alton, and the two men were clearly the guiding artistic forces behind the film's pleasures. Joan Bennett co-stars. As film historian Imogen Sara Smith explains on her commentary track, the director of record, Steve Sekely, stepped aside early on and the film was essentially directed by Henreid, kicking off a successful second career for him. Running 72 minutes, the story is rather ludicrous if examined objectively, but the film is so dominated by the subjective that you don't care at all. The plot's twists and turns (which also effectively shift the film's gears again and again), Henreid's engaging dual performance, and the wonderfully foreboding atmosphere are all captivating, and the film is quite a bit of fun regardless of how doomed the characters become.

The full screen picture is in very nice shape, with minimal wear or grain. The monophonic sound is fine and there are optional English subtitles. Smith gives a good talk, providing decent sketches of the cast and the filmmakers while at the same time delivering a viable analysis of the film's artistry. "What makes the film an interesting take on the identity theft theme is just how easy it appears to be. Even [Bennett's character] seems to be falling for it. You could see that as a sign of a shallow script, but I think you can also interpret it as expressing a very cynical attitude toward identity, and especially toward relationships, that people really don't care very much about each other and there is something interchangeable about them. The idea that people don't pay very much attention to the way others look or sound, which is necessary for identity theft stories to work at all, seems to be at odds with the power that faces and voices wield on film, a really intimate specificity with which we experience them. Perhaps we pay more attention in movies than we do in real life."

Roy Rogers in color

An enjoyable 1950 Republic Pictures Roy Rogers feature in lovely two-tone 'Trucolor,' **Sunset in the West**, has been released on Blu-ray by Paramount and Kino Lorber Incorporated as a *KL Studio Classics* title (UPC#738329207526, \$30). Running 67 minutes, the film has a bit more emotion than the usual formula western (the sheriff must decide whether or not to put his dog out of pain after a bad guy hurts the animal in an escape). The villains are hijacking trains and using them to transport guns, and the sheriff is being blamed for inaction. Rogers' character, a former deputy, agrees to help investigate the crime. Directed by William Whitney, there is a good balance between songs (including a very nice one about riding a train), action and character presentation ('development' would be too generous, but the cast is appealing and being in the company of the characters is enjoyable). The film's very awkward transitions between location and studio footage are also quite charming.

The picture is presented in full screen format and the image looks gorgeous from beginning to end. The monophonic sound is fine and there are optional English subtitles.

Film historian Toby Roan provides a commentary track, but it is mostly limited to supplying capsule biographies for every searchable member of the cast and crew, and a larger profile of Rogers and the different phases of his career. Roan has a couple of things to say about the production itself, and a few other technical details, but beyond that, his insight is limited. The big action scene at the end, for example, plays almost in its entirety with no more than a single comment about one of the stunts.