

Carnival horrors

The rubes will pass it by, but aficionados will be sucked right into The Criterion Collection's elaborate four-platter 4K Blu-ray release of Guillermo del Toro's **Nightmare Alley** (UPC#715515321419, \$60), the 2021 Fox Searchlight remake of the 20th Century Fox noir classic (Nov 21). Bradley Cooper stars as a Depression Era castaway who lands a job at a carnival, learns the ropes and eventually sets off with one of the carnies women to perform a successful mentalist act in nightclubs, only to meet a psychiatrist played by Cate Blanchett whose act, as it were, is on a whole other level. Rooney Mara, Willem Dafoe, Toni Collette, Ron Perlman, David Strathairn and Richard Jenkins (with eerie echoes of Jason Robards) costar, with Mary Steenburgen in a terrific bit part. The fabulously chromatic theatrical release runs 150 minutes and does its best to compensate for the inevitable, expected and, lord knows, projected downward vector of the final act with a richly populated narrative, filled with engaging and colorful characters and tales of life in the sawdust. For the Criterion release, however, del Toro has also put forth a 160-minute black-and-white rendition of the story, exchanging its fantastic hues for more focused and fatalistic imagery evocative of the original film, and an even richer extension of the plot's details and nuances.

There are, in fact, four different versions of the film on the four Criterion platters, all of which are letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. The black-and-white presentation and the color presentation each appear on a separate platter in 4K format and again on standard Blu-ray platters. The standard black-and-white image on the standard BD has a faintly bluish or silver tint that one would probably not even notice if one were not exposed to the purer blacks, greys and whites of the 4K presentation. After you see the 4K disc, however, the other looks entirely distorted or, at best, another way to watch the film and discern additional emotional content from its inadvertently accentuated tones. Hues on the color standard BD are rich and colorful, while hues on the color 4K have a slight, burnt yellow tone and are not as bright. In this instance, however, the drama favors the distortion. Watching the 4K presentation brought to mind the wonderful HBO series, **Carnivale** (Jul 05). The colors are subdued just enough to establish the period atmosphere and general moral instability of the drama while still communicating the fully seductive colorings of the sets, costumes and life-worn faces. Since three of the four versions are highly rewarding, while we would rank the 4K color presentation as the best, followed by the 4K black-and-white presentation and then the standard color presentation, all three are very worthwhile, with only the standard black-and-white presentation positioned at a distant fourth.

Most of the extra footage to the film appears in the first half, at the carnival, and it is surprising how much narrative and character can be created with just an extra 10 minutes or so of surgical additions. The advantage of watching the black-and-white version first and following it with the color version is that you at least know from memory or subliminal recall what occurred in the abridged passages, while the thrill of seeing everything fleshed out, as it were, makes the viewing experience both fresh and exciting (it also helps that the Dolby Atmos sound on the color version has a greater impact than the 5.1-channel DTS sound on the black-and-white version). Going first from the color version to the black-and-white version will turn the additional footage into a constant unfolding of micro surprises and enlightenments (an iris effect del Toro utilizes in a transition, for example, comes across as bland in color, but calls forth a tradition extending back to silent film and conveys that much extra power in its resonance in black and white), while the starkness of the black-and-white images, rather than being alienating, will feel like a massive enhancement to the film's spiritual damnations, stripping away the outer layers of civility to recognize the raw dynamics of the drama and the betrayals. We envy your choice.

Del Toro supplies a commentary over the black-and-white version on both platters and explains that while he could not light and shoot the film separately for black and white, he always had that secondary design in his mind as he and cinematographer Dan Laustsen laid out their lighting and color choices. Hues were chosen as much for how they would look without color as they were for how they appeared in the color presentation. Hence, the black-and-white version does come across better than if someone had simply turned off a 'color' switch, although conversely, there are times when the lighting they were obligated to use for color makes a scene look blander in black and white than it would look in a genuine black-and-white film. In going back to prepare the black-and-white version, Del Toro made different edits at times not for story content but to aid the impact and effectiveness of the cinematography in black and white. He says black and white 'plays' drama differently than color, and he adjusted scenes accordingly.

Del Toro's talk is excellent, not just for the tech stuff ("It is very useful, when you have a scene that is propelled by dialog, to go at it with masters in two directions, rather than coverage, because compositionally, it will tell you where you want to be. If you memorize the camera positions as the director, you know exactly where you're gonna cut. I edit every day and every day, I come to the editing room and in 2 hours, we shape the scene from the day before, all the dailies, so by the time I show up in set, I can show the actors what we shot the day before."), but for his appreciation of the drama, the actors and the contributions of his crew. He says he spent a year and a half before the film began shooting, collecting genuine props from the era, and he describes the challenges of finding the right locations to suit the times. He supplies his history and interpretation of film noir, linking it not to the end of World War II but to the desperation that grew out of the Thirties, and the manner which crime writers

sought to imitate Ernest Hemingway in their prose styles. He deconstructs his use of circles and other geometrical designs in the image compositions to accentuate the states of the characters and the film's themes, and he provides loads of basic filmmaking advice. "Every wardrobe piece in a movie is not there to make somebody or something look good. It's there to make something tell the story. Same with production design, the difference between what I call, 'Eye candy,' and what I call, 'Eye protein.' 'Eye protein' nurtures the story, 'eye candy' just adorns."

All four platters have optional English subtitles. The films start up where they left off if playback is terminated, but on the standard BDs, the supplementary features do not. The black-and-white standard BD also has three trailers, a 3-minute talk by del Toro about shooting the film for black-and-white that includes side-by-side comparisons of the two versions, and a 13-minute conversation between del Toro and co-writer Kim Morgan about the source novel, the structure of the film and the characters. Both color versions have an audio track that describes the action ("The man flips a lever, opening the doors and activating the exhibits, including a large mechanical eyeball on the other end of a rotating barrel. The traveler climbs inside. He whirls around, pointing his flashlight behind him, then continues through the now stationary barrel, stepping out before a mirror with a sign reading, 'Take a look at yourself, sinner.' The traveler turns away. In front of him, a giant mechanical devil's head opens at the mouth. The traveler bends down, peering through the opening at a large skull in a dim chamber. Ducking under the devil's pointed fangs, he crosses over."). The color standard BD also has an interesting 22-minute conversation between del Toro and Cooper about the work they did together, and an excellent 43-minute collection of comprehensive behind-the-scenes footage overlaid with illuminating cast and crew interviews.

3D horror

Hoping to sell as many tickets as possible, some marketing genius decided to call a 1968 3D film about a werewolves and vampires, **Frankenstein's Bloody Terror**, even though the titular fellow is nowhere to be seen, dimensionally or otherwise. MGM and Kino Lorber have released the Independent International feature as a *Kino Cult* 3D Blu-ray (UPC#73832927-0872, \$30). The film is set in the present day, with sports cars, but also has horse-drawn wagons. A gypsy guy and his woman are riding in such a wagon when a rainstorm announces itself. They hightail it to a nearby abandoned castle and break in, leaving their poor horse to stand in the drenching rain. Once they are settled, however, the gypsy says he is going to take care of his horse. He goes back outside, puts a blanket over the horse still in the pouring rain, only to get distracted when he spies a crypt that has promising graves to rob. And in one grave, there is a solid silver dagger exuding from the chest of a skeleton. Uh-oh.

Directed by Paul Naschy, he also stars as a count who is bitten while hunting for the werewolf the gypsies released, and although he kills the creature, he becomes a wolfman himself. While he keeps himself chained up at night to avoid going out and feasting on villagers, his girlfriend and his best friend send for an authority on such matters. When that authority and his wife arrive on the night train, it turns out they do not work during the day, and request help for their 'research' in the evening, as they take a liking to the necks of the girlfriend and the best friend (although contrary to the film's title again, their love bites are bloodless), inspiring Naschy's character to break out of his confinement. Running 78 minutes, and rated 'GP' (Kino must have been afraid to admit it, because the jacket claims the film is unrated), the dubbed acting is a bit giggle-inducing, heavy on the posing and little else, and there is a lot of coming and going with very little accomplished, but the movie has atmosphere, wolfmen and vampires, so it is not entirely without attractions.

Kino's 3D features are always welcome, because a great deal of care goes into them. The color film is presented on a single platter in three different formats—a regular 2D display, a 3D display designed for the single pair of red/blue glasses included with the platter, and a 3D display that can only be accessed with a special player, a special screen and special glasses, but delivers the full 3D effects without compromising the movie's colors (it can be misleading, but the 2D version is paired with this version and otherwise not identified on the initial menu screen). The film itself is blurry in places, especially around the edges, and has contrasts so compromised in spots that they come across as solid blobs of dark color instead of detailed shadows, as if it were a solarization effect. But when the cinematography is viable, the perspective shots add immensely to the entertainment. There are no 'in your face' spatial effects, or very, very few (at one point, some billiard balls break toward the camera), but there are chandeliers, cobwebs, pillars and décolletages (um, even Naschy has a chest that the 3D can enhance) to delight dimensional enthusiasts (in one particularly nice sequence, a couple goes for a walk in a forest of tall, thin trees), and since one of the film's few assets is its European dressings, the film is substantially aided when it can be savored in its full 3D splendor. Since many of the film's colors are already slightly subdued or bland, while the red/blue format robs intensity from the strongest hues, colors are still mostly discernible, and the 3D effects look terrific in either 3D format.

The monophonic sound is adequately delivered, and there are optional English subtitles. The film presented is the American theatrical version from 1971, for which low budget impresario Sam Sherman removed the movie's first reel in its entirety, and then substituted a wacky voiceover intro. That 16-minute reel is also included on the disc, in 2D, as a special feature, and we strongly recommend watching it before watching one of the 3D versions of the film.

While it is leisurely and you can sort of understand why Sherman dropped it, it does do a much better job of introducing the characters, so that their subsequent appearances don't seem quite so random, and even better, it creates an anticipation for the 3D effects to come. Also featured is an alternate 2-minute opening where the film was called *Hell's Creatures*, a trailer and three classic radio commercials.

Cult film expert Tim Lucas supplies one commentary track, pointing out the film's strengths and going into its history and Naschy's biography in great detail, while also covering the careers of the other cast members, analyzing the impact of he removed reel, and discussing the dynamics of the film's Spanish and German production roots. He sees the film as a significant step in the development of European horror features and identifies specific sequences that he finds to be especially worthwhile. Although he acknowledges the film's 3D component, he says nothing more about it on his talk, but he does go into it extensively on a 26-minute featurette (which has one red/blue 3D clip), thoroughly walking through the provenance of the BD's presentation, explaining why the basic image quality is so compromised and allowing as to why, nevertheless, it is worth savoring. "While this presentation is less than optimal, all concerned are fully satisfied that this Kino Lorber disc offers the very best 3D presentation this film has ever had in this country, and possibly in any country."

Horror enthusiasts Troy Howarth, Troy Guinn and Rodney Barnett provide a second commentary, covering much of the same material as Lucas did, including the backgrounds of the cast members, Sherman and the history of Naschy as a cult horror figure, but the conversational format of the talk is somewhat more engaging. While they discuss the 3D, it is still a fairly superficial analysis, but they do point out the value of having that version available because of the potential for attracting more fans, and they genuinely enjoy the feature. "Although this film is set in contemporary times, the joys of watching this movie are how much it wallows in Gothic atmosphere. This movie has atmosphere to burn." This was Naschy's first appearance as a wolfman, which they suggest turned into the longest running horror series (each film unrelated to the others, for the most part) of all, while establishing his career. "It's a wild film. It's the seed from which a might oak sprang, and the horror genre was better for its existence."

Zombie miniseries horrors

In the past, we have made note of how the limited cable series is a worthy motion picture format for the adaptation of a novel. However, there is a corollary that also turns out to be true—it is also ideal for the motion picture adaptation of a computer game. Such games have lengthy narrative branches and a theatrical film can only call up a few favorite moments, lay down some Easter Eggs, and then try to fashion enough of a coherent plot that people unfamiliar with the game will still be interested in plunking down their hard earned money for the quick ride. With a limited series, on the other hand, the filmmakers can go all out and basically recreate everything but the interactive sequences. And unlike a novel, they do not have to re-imagine the written words, they can just use the game's visuals as their own pre-visuals. The outstanding Warner Bros. HBO cable series about a world encroached upon by a zombie-activating fungus, **The Last of Us**, has done just that. We reviewed the initial season in Sep 23, and now WB Home Entertainment and SDS Studio Distribution Services HBO Home Box Office have released **The Last of Us The Complete Second Season** as a 4K UltraHD Blu-ray (UPC#883929838554, \$45).

First Season was sort of a road picture, with the two protagonists, played by Bella Ramsey and Pedro Pascal, traveling across America on mostly back roads, dodging both zombies and bandit gangs. The quality of the characterizations and the focused intensity of the narrative put the show on par with the early seasons of **The Walking Dead**, while legitimately and literally following its own path. **Second Season** begins several years later—the show often jumps ahead in time to keep its story moving, with flashbacks now and then to fill in the missing pieces—with the pair living in a large, fortified community at Jackson Hole. Most the action, however, shifts to Seattle, which is partially controlled by a militia and partially controlled by a group of tribal fanatics who eschew technology, with the zombies always lurking, mostly underground. Ramsey's character goes there to seek revenge, with a companion played by Isabella Merced. Jeffrey Wright is one of the leaders of the militia, and Catherine O'Hara is unexpectedly (and delightfully) cast as a therapist back in Jackson Hole.

Nothing in **Second Season** is anywhere near as powerful as the third episode in **First Season**, but then that episode was on par with the greatest episodes television has ever produced. Running 377 minutes—you can essentially get through **Second Season** in an afternoon and an evening—there is a grand battle with zombies early on, and plenty of images of gore throughout the season, but after the battle, the zombie appearances die down, as it were, and the suspense is generated by the two heroines trying to carry out their 'mission' without being caught. Again, while **First Season**, although it sort of had a cliffhanger, told a fairly complete, episodic story, **Second Season** has essentially one narrative and does not finish it, leaving the viewer rather desperate to find out what happens next. That said, there are many lovely dramatic moments throughout, which set the show apart from a program intent only upon action and horror. Characters talk about their feelings, their relationships and their lives, and there are sequences taking in the landscape or ruminating upon culture that form worthy breathers between the thrills. It is an entertaining and satisfying endeavor, but they damn well better be working on the third season.

Seven episodes are spread across three platters and each platter has a 'Play All' option. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1. The 4K image is sharp, spotless and invigorating. The Dolby Atmos sound has some terrific directional effects and a detailed dimensionality. There are alternate French, Spanish, Italian, German and Czech audio tracks, fourteen subtitling options including English, and a thorough 153 minutes of promotional and production featurettes. If you want a reprise of **First Season** before tackling **Second Season**, a pair of brief featurettes on the second platter, *Joel's Journey to Season 2* and *Ellie's Journey to Season 2*, provide a decent summary of what happened.

Classy horror

Opening on a solidly black screen—and not a speckle to be seen—what sounds like a British folksong (it was written for the film) is sung a cappella by a young woman. The song continues when the 20th Century Fox logo and subsequent Cinemascope logo appear in black and white, eschewing the normal Fox fanfare, and then gives way to the sounds of birds over the opening credits, as isolated images of hands appear amid the darkness. The Blu-ray image is exceptionally sharp and clean, and the impact of its audio and visual precision is thrilling on the Criterion Collection release of **The Innocents** (UPC#71551512-6816, \$40), a purity and exactness that never falters during the 1961 film's 100-minute running time. Under director Jack Clayton and cinematographer Freddie Francis, the widescreen imagery, letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1, is exceptionally well lit and composed, but Clayton pays equal attention to the film's intricate sound mix and to the management of the movie's gripping performances, including a pair of child actors. Based upon the popular and often adapted Henry James novella, *The Turn of the Screw* (it was even made into an opera once), Deborah Kerr has the central and dominating role as the daughter of a minister who has been hired to care for the two children in an impossibly large house in the English countryside that is otherwise inhabited by a handful of servants, and perhaps a pair of ghosts. Kerr's character becomes obsessed with the thought that the children are aware of the specters and communicate with them, leading her to increasingly intense emotional exchanges in an effort to determine what the kids have seen and what they know. The film is goosebump-level chilling the first time it is viewed, and with the gorgeous image and crisp monophonic sound, the Criterion Blu-ray is the ideal way to experience it. Once the film has been seen, or perhaps after seeing it a couple of times, the movie's frights subside as it plays out, but that is where the consistently masterful image compositions, sound design and editing, supporting the outstanding performances by Kerr and the others, arise to sustain the film's disturbing impact and allure, which never falters no matter how many times the film is revisited.

Megs Jenkins, Martin Stephens, and Pamela Franklin costar, with Michael Redgrave in another perfectly acted bit part as the children's uncle, who hires Kerr's character in the opening scene. Although he never appears again, his presence lingers vividly, and is even suggested at times in Stephens's clever performance (the wonderful Peter Wyngarde also appears, fleetingly, and earned a substantial billing for his brief, non-speaking part). There are optional English subtitles and a trailer. Also featured is an excellent 19-minute breakdown of the Francis cinematography and the challenges that were created by using Cinemascope (the candles had multiple wicks to enhance their flames); 14 minutes of terrific retrospective interviews with several people who worked on the film, including Francis; and a fascinating 23-minute history of the film that includes a marvelous shot of the payroll from the Broadway stage production Clayton had to incorporate to secure the rights (Beatrice Straight has the Kerr part, a young David Cole is the boy and Andrew Duggan is one of the ghosts) and a look at the actual locations where the outdoor scenes were shot.

Along with a steady comparison between the narrative and the James story, film historian Christopher Frayling integrates a comprehensive analysis of the film's artistry with an equally detailed breakdown of the movie's production on an excellent commentary track, discussing the film's various interpretations and pointing out how co-screenwriter Truman Capote imbued the film with a Southern Gothic sensibility. He is meticulous in his technical analysis and clear in the arguments he puts forward. "Horror movies come in two styles visually, one of them in your face and the other at the corner of the retina. This is a corner of the retina movie. What happens at the corner of the image? Well, sometimes you have uprights. You have pillars, bits of bed, sculptures, all sorts of verticals on either side of the cinemascope image. And that's one way of doing it, so you're actually framing the central action. Another way is by having a tunnel of light, a circle of light in the middle of the image, a kind of light that's thrown by candles, we'll see a little bit later on when Deborah Kerr explores the house in more detail, and that again brings the viewer to look at the center of the image rather than the sides. It's a classic use of Cinemascope. You wouldn't imagine a ghost story could be filmed in Cinemascope, in letterbox, but this was an occasion where it could be."

And he concludes, "I honestly believe that if you take all the layers I've been talking about in this commentary into account, **The Innocents** is the greatest ghost story ever filmed, based on the greatest ghost story ever written."

Horror amid the corn

An example, and there are many, of a mediocre film that nevertheless entertains entirely because of its horror elements, the 1984 **Children of the Corn**, available as a 4K Blu-ray from New World Pictures and Arrow Video (UPC#760137696292, \$50), is essentially about a couple trapped in a town populated by murderous children. There are several fantasies at work, including

one about children living without adult supervision and another about unseen, sinister forces lurking in the shadows. Based upon a Stephen King short story and directed by Fritz Kiersch, the film creates and sustains a viable atmosphere of foreboding, periodically divvies out a bit of gore, and concludes with a reasonable spectacle of fire. It has one good performance, by John Franklin playing the charismatic child who tells the other children what to do, and it has star power, since it was Linda Hamilton's biggest part before she made **The Terminator** the following year. Hamilton and top billed Peter Horton are a newlywed couple driving through Nebraska (actually, Iowa) when they are waylaid by an accident and then seemingly lost after following ambiguous road signs amid endless cornfields, until they arrive in what amounts to a ghost town, except for the kids sneaking around with knives and scythes. Running 92 minutes, the film maintains its suspense with a few jump scares and sufficient abstract intrigue to compensate for the general awkwardness of its staging and illogic of its situation. From there, it is the spirit of autumnal frights that justifies its excitements. It may be ridiculous, it may have very primitive animated effects during its climactic moments and it may subsequently have an abrupt, is-that-all-there-is? ending, but it is weird enough and suspenseful enough to satisfy one's basic Halloween cravings.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. The colors are fresh. When the cinematography is sharp, the 4K presentation is riveting, but there are also instances where the image is hazy, grainy and otherwise compromised, and in these instances, the viewer's subconscious concentration is also momentarily subverted. Arrow has also released a standard Blu-ray (UPC#760137044185, \$40), which has slightly brighter hues, but more grain and less captivating detail. The film defaults to a two-channel stereo, but there is also a 5.1-channel DTS track that can be selected. While the major sounds remain centered and are not overly ambitious, there are a few nice directional effects and disturbing surround noises. There are optional English subtitles.

Although the menu designs are different on the two releases, they contain the same special features, including a great 36-minute collection of intercut retrospective interviews with Kiersch, Franklin, and costar Courtney Gains, going over how they combined a number of different Iowa towns to create the one town (and then later shot other cornfields in California), recalling how nice all of the townspeople were and providing many other anecdotes about the shoot; a lovely 14-minute interview with Hamilton, sharing her memories about the film and her subsequent stardom; a very interesting 17-minute interview with scenarist George Goldsmith, who explains why he had to change King's story to accommodate the film adaptation (the two leads had to be more sympathetic, and two children had to be added to 'explain' stuff) and what King thought of the changes; an extensive 51-minute interview with cast members John Philbin and Julie Maddalena, talking about their memories and experiences making the film (every person who worked on it seems to have enjoyed the experience immensely); a nice 11-minute talk by producer Donald Borchers, recalling how much he enjoyed overseeing the film and the reactions to it; a two-part 15-minute compilation of talks by production designer Craig Stearns and by composer Jonathan Elias, both explaining how they landed the jobs, discussing some of the challenges, and sharing what it meant for their careers; a cute 6-minute interview with almost costar Rich Kleinberg, a local talent whose scene getting his throat cut was dropped from the completed film (he complains in good humor that a still from the scene made it onto a lobby card and other promotional artwork), sharing his reminiscences and saying how great he thinks the film is, even though he is only in it in spirit (his character's skeleton shows up later on); a great 16-minute revisit to the film's various Iowa locations, including interviews with the locals ("We had a couple from Wisconsin come in our driveway and ask us if we knew anything about it, and so we told them to come over here, film this house, and then we told them where the other scene was, and we told them the restaurant was burnt down, and so they wanted to know a bunch of stuff, so we told 'em."); a 6-minute montage of storyboards for the film's opening scene; and a trailer.

There are also two commentary tracks. One features Kiersch, Franklin, Gains and producer Terrence Kirby, recalling their experiences on the film. Kiersch and Kirby talk about the locations, the arrangements that had to be made, specific shooting challenges and compromises, and a trick that was played on Hamilton to obtain a perfect reaction shot. Franklin and Gains include stories about their parents on the set, the good times they had during the shoot and what the film has meant to them going forward:

"Even though I'm not, technically, in this scene, the fact that I axe a dog [offscreen], really, really puts me on a whole other level, so I'm not just killing humans, I'm killing animals. People never forget that. They're like, 'You killed a dog,' you know? It was very effective in making me a bad guy."

"How'd that help in your dating?"

"Metal chicks in the Eighties loved me."

A second track features **Children of the Corn** expert John Sullivan and fellow enthusiast Justin Beahm, who share more details about the cast and the locations, forgive the film's inexpensive special effects since most of its budget went to King, point out bloopers and provide a general appreciation of what the film accomplished—if you're from the Midwest and grew up around cornfields, the film is especially disturbing.

Finally, there is an impressive 19-minute short film from 1983 based upon the same King story, *Disciples of the Corn*. Written and directed by John Woodward, it is a more accurate rendition of the original King story, following

the same general idea and plot details as the feature film up to a point, but then ends in a more resolute fashion. Although made on a much smaller budget, it conveys a well-executed measure of heightening threats amid a disturbing atmosphere.

The joys of regional filmmaking are on display in the marvelous—and perfect for Halloween—BayView Entertainment Blu-ray double bill, **Attack of the Corn Zombies / Return of the Corn Zombies** (UPC#012233548419, \$38). Both films are letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1. Both have optional English subtitles that must be activated manually.

Directed by Steve Hermann and Ashley Hefner, and shot mostly in Farmer City, IL, the 2023 **Attack of the Corn Zombies** pretends to be set in 1969, and that is just one of its many delights. The period dressings are wonderful. One of the lovely classic cars has an anachronistic vanity license plate, but otherwise the decorations and costumes are impeccable, and the numerous wigs worn by many of the actresses are a gas. The performances are uniformly spirited, the gore is delicious, the head bashings are well executed (better than some Bollywood films we've seen), the dramatic interludes are sweet and the suspense sequences are efficient. The narrative is simple enough—corn that has been aided by an experimental fertilizer is served at a town event, and everyone who ate it turns into a flesh-eating zombie, with cornstalks growing out of their wounds. Yes, the corn is eating the people, a concept reinforced when the zombies often take an arm of a victim and begin munching on it as one might feast upon an ear...of corn. The heroes are a group of teenagers, including a couple of hippies and a greaser, who figure out what is going on and protect themselves as the others around them fall victim to the hordes. Running 75 minutes, the film is brisk, amusing, icky in a good way, and something the filmmakers can be eternally proud of having accomplished.

Perhaps to evoke the period setting (and hopefully not just a flaw), the colors are slightly faded and almost the entire feature has a steady but not too intrusive presence of scratches and speckles. The condition of the image does indeed aid in getting into the spirit of the feature. The music on the stereo soundtrack has a slight dimensionality, but most of the audio is centered.

Directed by Hermann and Mia Katz, the 2024 *Return of the Corn Zombies* runs 101 minutes and discards the camp components of the early feature to present a straightforward post-apocalyptic zombie tale, highly reminiscent, in fact, of the latter portion of the first season of **The Last of Us**. It begins with a half dozen characters wandering the landscape, trying to scrounge up food while avoiding being eaten themselves. They eventually make it to a safe haven, only to find that the place is run something like a cult. The zombies still have cornstalks growing out of their wounds, but otherwise, the film is serious and thoughtful, on par with the typical **Walking Dead** episode or something. On the one hand, it is not an utterly delightful, quasi-amateur entertainment the way that the first film is, but on the other hand, it is a competently made and satisfying zombie thriller. The performances, while earnest, will never be mistaken for SAG efforts, but that said, some of the cast members are highly appealing, as they were in the first film, precisely because of their girl/boy next door demeanor. There are no jump scares, but despite the leisurely build up required to develop the characters and the narrative, there is plenty of suspense. **Attack** was shot off season, and had no actual cornfields, just fallow stretches of land in the background, but *Return*, which was also shot in Farmer City, was made when the corn was as high as an pachyderm's eye, and the finale is set amid the stalks at night, with zombies, villains and heroes lurching out of the darkness from every direction.

Again, the anachronisms are kept to an impressive minimum—the story is set a couple of years after the first film, and the characters still dress like Sixties rejects—but sharp-eyed viewers will spot a modern road sign and a couple of other out-of-time objects. The most flagrant error, however, is a truck that drives past the characters quite obviously in the background in one shot. You expect it to be part of the plot, but no one acknowledges it, and it is not seen again. The picture quality is free of the flaws, faux or not, that decorated the first feature. Once in a while the colors will be a bit light, but most of the time hues are accurate and the image is free of impediments—one of the actresses has lovely red hair and gorgeous turquoise blue eyes, and the disc replicates her image quite flatteringly. The two-channel stereo score has a stronger dimensional presence than it did on the first feature.

Horror collections

A terrific trio of wonderful period costume films with horror components, each one substantially different from the other two, is gathered in the three-platter Blu-ray set released by Radiance, **Daiei Gothic Vol 2: Japanese Ghost Stories** (UPC#760137192688, \$80). Each movie is presented on a separate platter, letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. The color transfers are lovely, the lighting is always creative and evocative, and wear is minimal throughout the entire collection. In all three films, red paint-style blood flows freely. The monophonic sound is reasonably strong and nicely detailed. The films are in Japanese with optional English subtitles, and each is accompanied by a trailer.

As perfect a Halloween film as you could ever hope to see, Tokuzo Tanaka's 1969 *The Haunted Castle* has buckets of blood and images of flying demons galore. Like so many Japanese genre features, however, the cinematography is meticulously composed and framed, and the performances are marvelous, so that the courtly manners and rigid composure of the characters

create an ideal counterpoint to the manic spirals. In addition to the basic satisfaction of watching revenge takes its course, there is also immense satisfaction in watching the manners, rules and polite facades of the characters crumble when confronted by the manifestations of their moral decay. When her blind brother is murdered, a woman commits seppuku and in her dying breath urges her cat to carry out her curse upon the murderers, the lord of a castle and his aides. The cat gets right down to business. Running 83 minutes, the film is brisk and energetic, and yet its simplicity never becomes tiresome, even on multiple viewings, because of the immaculate image compositions, carefully executed staging and wonderfully spooky atmosphere. You can't ask for more.

Also featured on the platter is an excellent 17-minute appreciation and analysis of the film and its distinctive Daiei style, and a marvelous 6-minute profile of star Ikuko Mori.

Tanaka also directed the grand 154-minute samurai epic from 1960 with a substantial supernatural component and a marvelous all-star cast that includes Kazuo Hasegawa, Raizo Ichikawa and Shintaro Katsu, *The Demon of Mount Oe*. Although there are quite a few subplots involving various characters, the gist of the narrative is that a group of bandits led by a lord in league with demons plots to overthrow the ruler of the land, while a group of warriors loyal to the ruler try to develop a strategy to stop them. In a nice yin-and-yang touch, a woman who loves the lord is the captive of the heroes, while a woman who loves the main hero is a captive of the lord, and both come to understand their captors' hearts. Meanwhile, there is a grand battle with several hundred extras, a terrific fight against a hairy spider with a body—not counting the legs—the size of a Japanese automobile, a steady diet of action and an equal libation of romance. Since the costumes and set designs are so carefully constructed and color coordinated, the rather silly special effects are never embarrassing and instead feel like a celebration of the story's fantasy appeal.

A 4-minute summary of the sword and the legends the film is based upon is also featured, along with a very good 19-minute explanation of the context surrounding the production, both in terms of Daiei wanting to make bigger star-studded films, and Tanaka's beginnings as a director.

Most of the ghosts in *Ghost of Kasane Swamp* are symbolic, at least until the end of the film. Nevertheless, the 1970 Nobuo Nakagawa feature would make a terrific opera, about a progression of morally corrupt characters killing one another to get what they want. Running 83 minutes, the story finally settles on the daughter of a moneylender—who lifts his stash after he is murdered and buys a brothel from her former madam—and the son of the man who killed her father. The two were made for each other—the son kills several other people, including the daughter's sister—and are in a lustful romance until the former madam decides to extract her revenge. The turnover of characters keeps the story moving at a nice clip, and it never lingers for long between murders or other betrayals. The image has a distinctive grain and fleshtones have a reddish tint in darker portions of the screen, but the cinematography is still captivating and colors are often bright and beautifully composed.

Included on the platter is a 24-minute overview of the film's themes and artistry; an 18-minute analysis of the film, how it differs from other versions of the story (including another version made earlier by Nakagawa—the newer one has more sex), and how it compares to western horror franchises (it is more about human interaction and failings); and an excellent 12-minute summary of the story's roots and adaptations with lots of great clips and photos.

When you immerse yourself in a genre, such as horror, you become aware of the stratification of quality even within the lowered expectations that such genres anticipate. As we have mentioned in the past, the 1954 Gordon Douglas Warner Bros. monster ant film, **Them!**, scared the dickens out of us when we were younger, but it has repeatedly impressed us as we have gotten older because of how smartly it was constructed to scare the dickens out of us as a child, and to not compromise upon its basic suspense and excitement despite the ridiculousness of its premise. It is never silly, and while adult viewers can readily dismiss the ant monsters, they can still admire the craftsmanship with which the beasts have been designed and carefully parceled for viewing. Of course, we know now that atomic testing in the American Southwest has not mutated the ants living in the desert to grow into the size of SUVs, but in 1954, nobody could be entirely sure, and so the film, while intentionally a fantasy, was nevertheless not entirely outside the realm of possibility, perhaps even more possible than the other great 1954 monster film, **Godzilla**.

James Whitmore plays a New Mexico cop, the first man to confront one of the giant ants and live to tell the tale, and James Arness is the FBI agent who teams with him to work with ant scientists played by Edmund Gwynn and, as the curvaceous but learned daughter of Gwynn's character, Joan Weldon, with the entire United States military at their command. One of the very enjoyable aspects to the 92-minute feature is that a bevy of familiar faces shows up in bit parts, including Sheb Wooley, Dick York, Dub Taylor, William Schallert, Leonard Nimoy and Fess Parker. The film is expertly paced, raising both the stakes and suspense as the heroes appear to clean out the nest, only to determine that a new ant queen has already fled, ending up in the storm drains of Los Angeles for the grand finale, where, again smartly, a pair of youngsters are trapped and must be saved before the insects can be incinerated.

After releasing **Them!** on Blu-ray individually (Jun 16), Warner Home Video then released the film as part of a four-platter set, **Special Effects Collection** (Jun 16). Now, Warner has reissued that same Blu-ray as part of a

four-platter Warner WB Archive Collection release, **4-Film Collection: 50s Sci-Fi** (UPC#883929841967, \$40). It is the same disc, with a nice black-and-white transfer, letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1. Yes, the cinematography is a little soft and grainy at times, especially during the darker sequences, but the image is generally spotless. The monophonic sound is solid, and the movie is accompanied by a trailer and a cute 3-minute collection of effects outtakes. All of the films in the Sci-Fi collection have optional English subtitles, but **Them!** also has optional Spanish subtitles.

The **Special Effects Collection** had classy packaging, and while the **Sci-Fi** set is a little more basic, it is still effectively designed, with each platter presented on a separate spindle, unencumbered by the other platters. Another Blu-ray that appeared in that earlier set has also been carried over, the Ray Harryhausen and Eugene Lourie 1953 stop motion classic that indeed anticipated **Godzilla**, Warner's **The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms**, which also appeared on Blu-ray individually (Jun 16). A dinosaur is released by atomic tests in the Arctic and makes its way by the sea to New York City. Paul Christian is an atomic scientist who spearheads the efforts to stop him, with Cecil Kellaway in the Gwynn role as the curmudgeonly scientist and Paula Raymond in the Weldon role as the scientist's attractive scientist assistant. Lee Van Cleef had his first truly memorable part, as the sharpshooter who ultimately takes down the beast ("Colonel says you need a dead shot." "Yes. Ever use a grenade rifle?" "Pick my teeth with it." "Good. Know what a radioactive isotope is?" "No, but if it can be loaded, I can fire it."), and Kenneth Tobey is also featured. Running 80 minutes, the film does have a couple of viable frights, while the special effects are wonderful and, like so much of Harryhausen's work, are never compromised by their antiquity.

Again, the transfer is the same as the previous BDs. The black-and-white picture is in a squared full screen format and is in decent condition (there is one quick splice), with minimal wear, while the monophonic sound is reasonably strong. There are alternate French and Spanish audio tracks and optional French and Spanish subtitles, a trailer, a 7-minute interview with Harryhausen and a marvelous 17-minute conversation between Harryhausen and screenwriter Ray Bradbury.

Ludicrous but irresistible, the 1958 Allied Artists **Attack of the 50 Ft. Woman**, directed by Nathan Hertz, even has terrible special effects, but it only runs 66 minutes, which is just enough time to communicate its ideas and themes, and then get off the screen before the tomatoes start flying. Exposure to a UFO enlarges a jealous woman, much to the consternation of her philandering husband. Set in a small town, the characters sort of scramble around back and forth while she begins growing, and then just have to get out of the way of her wrath. You can clearly see the backgrounds through her supposedly enlarged body in the double exposure shots, and although the few brief seconds of miniature work are reasonably beguiling, there is a large hand that looks phony as all get out. The black-and-white picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. We reviewed a DVD in Aug 07, and a commentary from that DVD is carried over, hosted by Fifties cult film expert Tom Weaver with some nice reminiscences from one of the supporting actresses, Yvette Vickers.

The fourth film, the 1956 **World without End**, another Allied Artists production, directed by Edward Bernds, plays like a **Star Trek Original Series** episode a decade later, but that is not a bad thing. American astronauts from our time land on a vastly changed Earth and must help mankind get back on its feet. For horror, there are giant spiders and mutants with cyclopean eyes. Running 80 minutes, the film is a decent blend of action and dramatic intrigue, with engaging production designs that at least tickle the imagination if they fall somewhat short of fully stimulating it. Hugh Marlowe and Rod Taylor (in an early part, still retaining a touch of his accent; the film distinctively anticipates his later starring role in George Pal's **The Time Machine**) are among the astronauts, and Nancy Gates is among the more attractive humans they come across. Letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1, the film is the only movie in color in the set, so you really do feel like you are transported to a new world after the three black-and-white films. The transfer looks great, with bright hues, clear details and accurate fleshtones. We reviewed the film as part of a DVD double bill in Mar 09, and the image on the BD has stronger, smoother hues. The monophonic sound is solid.

Horror anthologies

George Romero wrote the script adapting three Stephen King short stories that were subsequently directed by Michael Gornick for the 1987 New World Pictures horror anthology, **Creepshow 2**, released as a New World Arrow Video 4K Blu-ray (UPC#760137187721, \$50). With an animated linking tale about a youngster getting a package and then being chased by a group of bullies, the first story is wonderfully cast with George Kennedy and Dorothy Lamour (in her final screen appearance) as kindly storeowners whose deaths at the hands of robbers are avenged by their store's wooden Indian statue. The piece has a couple of decent moments of gore and brief excitements associated with those moments, but is otherwise lackluster except for the presence of the stars. The second segment is the best, about four randy college kids trapped on a floating dock in an isolated lake by a blob that consumes them if they touch the water. The blob is inexpensively conceived, but that just adds to the segment's wit. It has suspense, sex, gore and a marvelous finale. Closing out the 89-minute feature, the final sequence stars Lois Chiles as the wife of a rich lawyer driving home late at night by herself when she hits a man in the road and drives off (King has a cameo part as a passing truck driver). The man's body reappears in front of

her, however, and she essentially can't get rid of it as it becomes a bloodier and bloodier mess the more she attempts to damage it. Some of the body's appearances create quick scares, but the primary appeal of the segment is in the relentlessly accumulating gore and—at least for some viewers—the equally relentless damage she does to her Mercedes in the process.

Letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1, the colors are fresh and fleshtones are finely detailed. Arrow also released a standard Blu-ray (UPC#760137960485, \$35), and while its hues are also bright and unfaded, its image is significantly grainier compared to the smooth 4K delivery. The cinematography is soft at times, but when it is sharp, the 4K image is also crisper than the standard BD. Since the inexpensive nature of the film diminishes its overall thrills, the improvements to the delivery created by the 4K transfer are critical to the film's ability to entertain. Although the movie defaults to its monophonic audio track, there is also a 5.1-channel DTS track on both discs that gives the music a viable dimensionality and generally accentuates some of the frights. There are optional English subtitles.

The menu design on the 4K release is an improvement over the standard BD. Both contain the same special features, including two trailers; a TV commercial; a 4-minute montage of promotional stills; a 7-minute interview with Tom Savini, who plays a live action monster in the mostly animated bridging story, talking about his makeup and about being paid for a New World film he never shot, and 6 minutes of behind-the-scenes footage depicting Savini's work on the film; an 11-minute interview with Romero going over his history with anthology programs and complaining that **Creepshow 2** was probably too constrained by its budget; a 14-minute interview with costar Tom Wright (he played the crash victim that continues to show up) talking about his experiences on the set (verifying that his group had a lot of fun making the film) and how it has benefited his career; a nice 14-minute interview with costar Daniel Beer—he was one of the characters on the floating dock—talking about landing the part, coping with hypothermia through much of it, and the unexpected lasting attention it has garnered him; and an excellent 34-minute intercutting of talks with special effects technicians Howard Berger and Greg Nicotero, explaining in detail how many of the effects were achieved, sharing stories about the conflicting problems in developing the effects for a couple of the sequences stemming from overlapping responsibilities and interests that led to them becoming the primary effects people on the set (thus beginning what became a lucrative Hollywood business for them), admitting their admiration for makeup legend Rick Baker and their interaction with him, and describing with great amusement how several gallons of black goop got all over the interior their car because they took a turn too quickly and didn't have appropriate lids fastened.

There is also an excellent commentary by Gornick, prompted by film expert Perry Martin. He steps through each phase of the production, describing the problems they encountered (bad weather in Arizona threw their entire schedule off by a couple of weeks; Barbara Eden was originally supposed to do he Chiles role, but a family emergency at the last moment forced them to recast the part, creating more delays), how various technical challenges were accomplished, and what it was like working with the actors—he points out that one of the greatest challenges in directing an anthology film is that you have to restart with the cast from scratch for each story.

Two omnibus films each containing a trio of Asian horror stories have been released in a two-platter Blu-ray set by Arrow, **Three / Three...Extremes** (UPC#760137183839, \$40). Each of the stories has opening and closing credits, although a longer credit scroll also appears at the end of each film. The movies are letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. Each story has a different cinematographer and a different style, but it is clear that the image transfers are meticulous. That said, while the images on *Three* are consistently smooth, the images on *Three...Extremes* have a very pronounced and consistent grain. Both films have 5.1-channel DTS tracks, but default to standard stereo tracks, so the 5.1 must be selected, and both films are supported by optional English subtitles. Each story is in the language associated with its director.

Overseen by Hong Kong director Peter Ho-Sun Chan, the 2002 **Three** begins with a Korea tale, *Memories*, directed by Jee-woon Kim, which has the most jump scares thanks to its aggressive audio mix, and is reminiscent, in style, of David Lynch. It is primarily about a man in a nice apartment having nightmares because his wife is missing. Elegantly staged, the story may be fairly obvious, but the manner in which it is presented is the essence of its appeal. The second story, from Thai director Nonzee Nimibutr, *The Wheel*, is about a puppet master who attempts to collect cursed puppets and pays the price. While it is not as inherently thrilling, its rural setting and exotic décor make a great counterpoint to the opening story and give the entire film a sense of adventure and cultural exploration. The final and most compelling story, *Going Home*, was directed by Chan, about a cop and his son who have moved into a condemned apartment building. The little boy sees a girl his age and follows her one evening. After he disappears, the cop begins looking for him and knocks on an apartment where a man has apparently killed his wife, but is keeping her well groomed because he expects her to come back to life. Normally we would not spoil the ending of such a tale, but it is deliberately obscure and understanding what happened actually adds to the story's power—the little girl wants to be reunited with her parents, and her scheme achieves that goal.

Also featured on the platter is a 25-minute interview with Chan, who talks about his career and then how the film came to fruition (he was initially just

going to produce, but the director the Hong Kong segment couldn't figure out a story problem—which Chan solved brilliantly afterwards—and dropped out, so Chan took over), an additional 24-minute interview ("The more you know about how to shoot a movie, the more you don't know. The more you realize that there are other ways, that your way is not necessarily the right way. And the more you know and accept that there are other ways, the more interesting your film is going to become."), and another 31-minute interview—the interviews all touch on the same topics, but each adds more illuminating details, including specifics about the performances, the cinematography, the editing, the nature and economics of Asian cinema, the sequel (see below) and other topics; a 14-minute interview with Kim about his career and how he went about constructing his segment, and another 16-minute interview approaching the same topics with different details ("In a way, bad memories are a bit like ghosts, like spirits that follow you around your entire life."); a cute 6-minute interview with cinematographer Kyung-pyo Hong about how he approached *Memories* and how he got so into it that he started scaring himself; a nice 12-minute interview with Eugenia Yuan, one of the stars of *Going Home*; a passable 16-minute promotional featurette including behind-the-scenes footage from all three parts; and a trailer.

As the title of the second film, from 2004, suggests, the stories are somewhat more radical and gruesome. The opening tale, Fruit Chan's *Dumplings*, is about a wealthy woman desperate to hold onto her youth, who begins patronizing a woman that sells very expensive dumplings, because they are filled with human embryos. It works, for a while. Unlike the first film, there is a lot of sex and a lot of blood, and a gnarly plot that touches on a different sensitive issue at every turn. Some viewers will find its satire sublime, while others will feel quite the opposite. It can be agreed upon that the performances are quite good, but little else about it is likely to achieve a consensus. The second tale, *Cut*, from Korean director Chan-wook Park, is sort of like an abstract version of **Saw**, or perhaps **Old Boy**, or, perhaps, in a thematic way, **Parasite**. The protagonist is a movie director who arrives at home—which then turns into a film studio, suggesting hopefully that it is all just a nightmare, although there is never a resolution regarding that premise—and finds that a former extra has tied up the director's pianist wife at the piano and is threatening to cut off her fingers one by one unless he strangles a child on the couch. Lots of blood and uncomfortable situations ensue. Again, the enhanced gore seems to accentuate the satirical nature of the situation, and while it is once again well acted and explores a number of dramatic psychological conflicts, that's all there is to it. The final story in the 127-minute film, *Box*, is directed by Japan's horror master, Takashi Miike. A woman has dreams, anxieties and nightmares over the guilt she feels for, as a child, killing her sister. It is immediately apparent that Miike has a greater command of the medium than the other directors. His choices are both economical and confident, and however silly the film's punchline may be, or however gossamer-like the story may be, the film is riveting from beginning to end, steadily progressing from one intriguing or striking image and idea to the next. As a freestanding work, it would be more inconsequential, but as a wrap up to the two films in the set, it is both succinct and definitive.

Peter Chan, who only produced the film this time, talks for 16 minutes, explaining how the success of the first film enabled them to land the upper echelon directors they had for the second film, and how the 'hobby' nature of getting to do a shorter feature attracted them to the project. Fruit Chan, on the other hand, in a 15-minute interview, laments that the current environment discourages interest in anthologies because viewers prefer to binge watch a single, cohesive narrative program. He also talks about working with the actresses and his approach to the film. He goes into greater detail in a 43-minute interview, talking about his career, how he became involved in the project and how he chose his film, and about the details of the shoot, but he also explains that he was able to make a feature-length movie from the story at the same time with the same money, deliberately altering the plot in spots so the two wouldn't be exactly similar, and using the feature to flesh out a number of supporting characters. Along with a trailer for the anthology, a second trailer for that *Dumplings* feature is also included. *Dumplings* star Bai Ling talks for 19 minutes in a terrific interview, describing how she became involved in the project and how little rest she got while shooting, doing some key scenes by instinct alone.

Miike provides a commentary over his 47-minute segment, talking about the specifics of the shoot and why he made various choices, and he also has a 17-minute interview, where he talks in more general terms about how he landed the job, what his philosophies are regarding horror ("Horror that makes sense isn't very interesting. It's the stuff you don't understand that's scary.") and his general approach to the film. 53 minutes of great production featurettes for all three pieces are presented, as well, including footage of a long take in *Cut* that was perfect until the very end, when one of the actors couldn't help but laugh.

Halloween horrors

Presented in 4K format, the Warner Bros. Arrow Video Blu-ray release, **Trick 'r Treat** (UPC#760137181910, \$60), enhances the 2009 film's atmosphere and frights with an image that is smoother and sharper than a carving knife. The 83-minute film is an interconnected collection of five grisly stories, set on Halloween evening in a single town, cutting back and forth so that not only do some of the stories advance concurrently, but there are glimpses of some characters in the stories of others (much like **Pulp Fiction**). It is intended to call forth the bag of goodies evoked by its title. Directed by Michael Dougherty, the film may not succeed in supplanting other Halloween classics, but the 4K presentation greatly enhances both the elaborate production designs and the

crispness of the scares, while again, like the treats in the bag, nobody wants just one on Halloween. Anna Paquin, Brian Cox and Dylan Baker are among the cast.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. We reviewed a Warner DVD in Nov 09, and while there was nothing particularly wrong with the image, it wasn't as easy to be enthusiastic about the film's mood and spirit as it is with the 4K Blu-ray. The 5.1-channel DTS sound—which has to be selected, the default is a standard stereo—is also richer than the sound on the DVD, so that even though the separation mix is not especially elaborate, the audio punctuations have a greater impact and the score, including a number of pop hits, is more compelling. There are optional English subtitles and a 4-minute cartoon that also appeared on the DVD, *Season's Greetings*, made by Dougherty himself in 1996 and accompanied by his commentary.

An excellent 17-minute collection of deleted scenes comes with an alternate commentary from Dougherty, as well, explaining why the footage was removed. While the sequences would have compromised the pacing of the film, they offer an enhanced opportunity to spend time with the cast and their performances, an additional chance to savor the film's holiday atmosphere, and a lot more humor. Kind of working like a mini movie in itself, the segment is the disc's best additional treat.

Also featured is a single stationary 60-minute ground level shot of a decorated pumpkin lit by a candle and sitting in a yard; a trailer; a cute collection of macabre promotions for the film with different holiday themes (Easter and Christmas); a good minute-long comparison of a before-and-after special effects sequence; a very good still frame collection of promotional photos, storyboards, design sketches, production photos and a comic book inspired by the film; a nice 3-minute tribute to makeup artist Bill Terezakis, who passed away in 2021; a fun 9-minute interview with costar Quinn Lord, who acted in the film as a child (in an ominous costume as a demonic threat to other characters) and is now all grown up; a satisfying 16-minute piece about the initial conceptualization of the film and the development of its look; an interesting 7-minute piece about the film's marketing and belated popularity; an 11-minute segment on the film's sound and score that includes a detailed deconstruction of some themes by composer Douglas Pipes (on passages evocative of *Psycho*: "We get to go in and record it, and tell the orchestra basically, 'Take your million dollar instruments and be as aggressive as you can with them.'"); a passable 9-minute interview with creature designer Patrick Tatopoulos; a great, detailed 16-minute interview with costume designer Trish Keating ("We researched a lot of fabric to find what worked best for her cape and her hat."); an informative 12-minute interview with production designer Mark Freeborn talking not only about the film's design, but about the location choices (in Vancouver BC); a very good 17-minute interview with cinematographer Glen MacPherson describing the challenges and requirements for shooting various scenes; a good 27-minute promotional featurette narrated by Cox that includes a decent thumbnail history of Halloween and some excellent behind-the-scenes segments; and a 20-minute summary of the film's production by Dougherty.

Dougherty, Pipes and artists Breehn Burns and Simeon Wilkins also provide a good commentary track, talking about how the film was conceived, going over details in the production ("We couldn't use any recognizable candy wrappers. Had to make up our own, which was kind of fun, because we came up with stuff like, 'Big Fudge Log,' you know, and, 'Holly Ho,' which I think was some crewmember's way of getting back at his girlfriend. So if you look closely at the names of the wrappers, you'll see a bunch of fun, quirky things."), pointing out aspects to the film's interconnected stories that will only be noticeable on multiple viewing, identifying the inspirations for the music and explaining the film's themes. "Each story represents a different stage of Halloween in your life."

Dougherty has a second track, too, with a pair of enthusiasts, James Janisse and Chelsea Rebecca. He talks more about his thought process in writing the script and staging the film, comes up with a few details overlooked in the first talk, and checks in on his progress with the sequel (he already has storyboards), but it is a relaxed conversation and has less to offer overall.

An inspired 84-minute montage of elaborate Halloween lawn decorations, **Screamitville**, has been released on Blu-ray by Borderline Media Group LLC (UPC#760137187936, \$20), a company that has also been responsible, according to the trailer on the disc, for having released three similar programs depicting Christmas decorations. Reminiscent of the old 'image music' home video programs, the presentation has no credits whatsoever and is simply a steadily advancing display of clever, amusing and consistently impressive front yard and neighborhood displays, set to a subdued but ominous, mildly stereophonic musical score and occasional sound effects. Letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1, the image quality is smooth and sharp. The program is shot and edited with expertise, so that it progresses methodically while lingering no longer than it has to on any display or specific component of a display to convey the idea or feeling the display is imparting. Left, right, up and down, each visual series is never jarring, but is carefully designed to sustain an interest in what will come next, and next. The show is ideal for putting on in the background at your own Halloween get together, or perhaps simply to set up as a display with a projector in your own yard and piggyback upon what more creative people have already achieved. In any case, like the Christmas programs, it is a utility company executive's wet dream.

Made-for-TV horror

A superbly scripted 1974 made-for-TV thriller, **Bad Ronald**, is available on Blu-ray from Warner Home Video as a *Warner WB Archive Collection* title (UPC#888574722562, \$24). Running 74 minutes, the film's only shortcoming is the abridgements that had to be executed in the final act to fit the tale into the running time, but by then the viewer's imagination is so engaged that the movie has done all the work it needs to. The narrative momentum is exquisite. Written by Andrew Peter Marin and directed by Buzz Kulick, the film begins with a teenager played by Scott Jacoby accidentally killing a young girl and going home to tell his divorced mother what happened. Being highly protective, she devises a scheme where they can quickly put up a false wall in their old Victorian house and hide a large bathroom that they convert into a living space. When the cops finally nose around the house a couple of days later, the mother claims that the boy is missing. Sometime after that, the mother dies during an operation in a hospital and the house is sold to another family, with three teenage girls, while Jacoby's character is still living in the woodwork, and conveniently slipping out at night to grab food from their fridge. He also becomes fixated on one of the girls. Not only is the basic premise of the film wonderfully creepy, but its management of point-of-view is outstanding, obligating the viewer to identify with every character.

Kim Hunter, John Larch, Dabney Coleman, Pippa Scott and Cindy Eilbacher costar. The picture is in a squared full screen format, with sharp, fresh colors. The crisp quality of the image also contributes to the suspense. The monophonic sound is fine, and there are optional English subtitles.

Serial killer horror

A wonderfully gruesome and suspenseful 1994 Danish crime thriller, **Nightwatch**, has been released in a two-platter Blu-ray set by Arrow Video, **The Nightwatch Collection** (UPC#760137180364, \$40), with an equally gratifying 2023 sequel, *Nightwatch: Demons Are Forever*. Both films were written and directed by Ole Bornedal. In the first film (*Nattevagten*), Nikolaj Coster-Waldau (who would later make it into *Game of Thrones*) is a law student who lands a night job as a watchman in a wing of a medical school that contains the morgue but is generally unpopulated after work hours. His best friend is an irritating prankster, much to the consternation of the two girlfriends. The friend, for example, arranges dinner for the two men with a prostitute, while other prostitutes in town are being murdered and scalped by a psychopath, their bodies ending up in the morgue that the hero watches over. And then, all sorts of creepy, oddball things start happening. The bodies move around, but only he sees them displaced. The prostitute is being terrorized and blames him, and things get increasingly hairy. Running 107 minutes, the plot is logical enough to pass superficial smell tests and keeps you guessing until it switches over to plain old terror and gore, but it remains exciting and entertaining every step of the way, effectively blending touches of humor with its terrors.

Calling forth echoes of *Silence of the Lambs* with portions of it set in an asylum, the equally cerebral, equally thrilling and gloriously sick sequel—which is also called *Nattevagten* in Danish, exactly like its predecessor and underscoring the idea that it is an inspired continuation of the first film—is set several decades later and calls back some of the (wonderfully aged) characters, including Coster-Waldau, as well as introducing new ones. This time, it is a young female med student and daughter of Coster-Waldau's character, played by Fanny Leander Bornedal (the director's daughter, FYI), who gets the job as the night watch person, and also begins researching the tragedy depicted in the first film and its aftermath. This stirs up unfortunate attention, and soon more scalped bodies are littering the pavement. Like the first film, the marvelous plot twists keep coming and coming, and the 118-minute film is more exhilarating with every turn. Both films also end with surprisingly cheerful conclusions for ominous Scandinavian thrillers, and while the plots are certainly a little bit ridiculous, if one has been watching a number of outright silly horror features, the two movies are immensely satisfying in how they go about delivering their horror and gore without undercutting an atmosphere of seriousness and intelligence.

The first film is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1 and the sequel is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. Otherwise, both presentations have the same quality. The color transfers are sharp and fresh, and details are reasonably clear in the darker parts of the screen, at least when they are supposed to be. On both, the 5.1-channel DTS sound has a decent dimensionality and strength—the characters like to listen to heavy metal, and it comes through loud and clear. The films are in Danish with optional English subtitles.

The first platter comes with three trailers; a good 17-minute interview with cinematographer Dan Laustsen about meeting Bornedal, working with the small crew, some of the lighting choices he made and how the film has affected his career (see *Nightmare Alley*); a 14-minute introduction to both films, including a notation of the performers who would go on to appear in major Danish TV shows, such as *The Bridge*, as well as those who have appeared in films in Britain and so on; and a good 28-minute production featurette combining clips from the film, footage from behind the scenes, and interviews with various crewmembers explaining what their jobs are.

The second platter contains an 18-minute analysis and summary of the two films that suggests they are about the fears of adulthood; a 22-minute analysis of the two movies that is a bit better, but less sweeping, in its assessment and interpretations; and a trailer.

Bornedal supplies a sporadic commentary over the first film, mostly musing upon the narrative, but also lamenting choices that he would no longer make ("This is really over the top. It's insane. I don't think I could make a scene like that today. It's made out of youthful stupidity, but it will probably entertain some people.") and now and then supplying background information about the shoot and the cast.

In 1997, Bornedal followed the siren call to Hollywood and made an English language version of the first film, Nightwatch, for Miramax and Dimension Films, which is available on DVD from Dimension Home Video (UPC#717951000743, \$28). Steven Soderbergh collaborated with him on the script (Bornedal speaks a lot about the production in his commentary on the other disc), which takes advantage of a couple of opportunities that were missed the first time through, but also picks up the pace a little bit to the film's disadvantage. Running 101 minutes and set in Los Angeles, the film delivers plenty of suspense, but has less time to breathe. It still comes across as a classy thriller with a little bit of gore, but the characters are less developed, there isn't as much humor and the movie's raw mechanics are more obvious. Ewan McGregor is fine in the central part, but Josh Brolin pales significantly in comparison to his Danish counterpart, compromising an important emotional foundation. Patricia Arquette, Nick Nolte and an uncredited John C. Reilly are also featured, with Brad Dourif nearly stealing the movie in another supporting role. There is an alternate French language track, optional English subtitles and a trailer.

No escaping the horrors of Jason

Ya seen one Jason movie, ya seen 'em all, right? Well, not when it comes to New Line Entertainment's wonderful 2001 Jason X, which is set in outer space. Released by Warner Bros., New Line and Arrow Video as a 4K Blu-ray (UPC#760137175735, \$50), both Jason and a final girl are frozen in a cryogenic chamber and reawakened by a treasure hunting team several centuries later, after the Earth has undergone an ecological collapse, with the final girl being the only one who understands the menace that has been uploaded to the transport ship taking them to humanity's second home. A witty mash up of the usual **Friday the 13th** tropes—there are quite a few young people working on the ship and they are all hot for one another—and **Alien**, the 91-minute feature, directed by James Isaac, is briskly paced, with decent **Star Trek** TV sequel-level special effects, and entertaining characters. Lexa Doig, Lisa Ryder, Kristi Angus, Melyssa Ade and Kane Hodder star, and none other than David Cronenberg has a cameo part. The film isn't just fun, it is repeatable fun, full of sex, gore, and emergency hatchway doors that won't close or open when you want them to.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. The image transfer is sharp, enhancing the sci-fi set designs and magnifying some of the shortcomings in the digital graphics. Fleshtones are accurate and hues are finely detailed. The 5.1-channel DTS sound has a workable dimensionality and delivers plenty of choice noises.

We reviewed a DVD in Dec 04, which was not as solid or sharp as the 4K BD and had weaker sound. A commentary featuring Isaac, writer Todd Farmer and producer Noel Cunningham has been carried over, along with a 30-minute overview of the **Friday the 13th** series that spawned the 'Jason' character, and an 18-minute production featurette.

Additionally, the film comes with three trailers; eight TV commercials; over three hundred promotional photos and memorabilia in still frame; a 23-minute interview with Farmer describing his thought process in more detail to explain how the story was developed; a terrific 11-minute interview with Angus cheerfully recalling her experiences making the film and discovering the serendipity of going to conventions; a passable 10-minute interview with composer Harry Manfredini, who penned the original iconic whispering 'Jason' theme and talks about his initial surprise at being asked to come back for the second film, and then goes on to talk specifically about how he adapted **X** to its sci-fi surroundings; a 33-minute collection of retrospective interviews describing the ups and downs of the differing plot ideas that were proposed, the actual production and the aftermath of its release; a 16-minute interview with uber creator Sean S. Cunningham about the series, how he came to move it from Paramount to New Line, and how the film was spawned (as well as how the series now seems to be drifting more into the game world); 59 minutes of nice promotional interviews with the cast and crew; and 74 minutes of excellent behind-the-scenes footage detailing the shot by shot construction of several action sequences.

Farmer and **Friday the 13th** historian Peter Bracke talk about the film and the story on another commentary track. Farmer also had a brief part in the film and talks about that experience, as they discuss the film's lousy marketing (they feel it gave too much away), the dynamics of the story, and the great job done by the cast. When Bracke suggests that Farmer did an exceptional job creating the characters, he counters, "To give the actors their due, for a lot them there wasn't anything so they just came up with it on their own, create their own little moments, and that's great."

Horror film enthusiasts Michael Felsher and Steve Barton provide a celebratory commentary track that makes valid points ("What I appreciated about this movie is that it knows exactly what it is. It's like, okay, inherently, this is ridiculous, that Jason Voorhees has been around long enough we're going to send him into space to keep things fresh. How can we have fun with this? And also, they did a good job with the characters. I like a lot of the characters in this movie." "Yeah, nobody really felt superfluous.") but really does not have much

to offer. They talk about the marketing failure that prevented the film from initially reaching a fanbase that would have enjoyed it, and also talk at length about how the film had a first-of-its-kind quality bootleg well before its theatrical release. Otherwise, however, they just talk in general terms about the movie and the series, pointing out the scenes they really like and why they like them, and generally cheerleading the film and its glorious murders.

Warner and Arrow have also released New Line's 1993 Jason Goes to Hell in a two-platter 4K Blu-ray set (UPC#760137175742, \$50). Directed by Adam Marcus, the acting is substandard, even by the extremely loose requirements for the series, and while the film starts out like a typical slasher feature, it then morphs into something closer to **The Hidden** (with allusions to many other Seventies and Eighties horror films, from **Evil Dead** to **The Thing**), as Jason kind of transfers his spirit from one victim to another while he chases after the original final girl and her descendants. The film's best moments occur at the very beginning, where Marcus teases the viewer with cliché shots and editing that deliberately avoid a payoff. The film does have time to establish the characters—while the daughter and baby grandchild of the original final girl are the primary goal of whatever body Jason is inhabiting, the efforts of the baby's father to escape police custody and protect the baby and her mother give the film an engaging momentum. But once Jason leaves his original manifestation, the deaths become less interesting and despite brief flurries of action and gore, the film feels like a run-of-the-mill effort. The narrative often defies even its own internal logic just so it can include more special effects, and as the final shot reveals, the entire film was created just to set things up for its title bait sequel, **Freddy vs. Jason** (Feb 04).

Two versions of the movie are presented separately on the two 4K platters. The *Theatrical Cut* runs 88 minutes on the first platter and the *Unrated Cut* runs 91 minutes on the second platter. While some minor pieces of dialog have been added, the main changes are the enhanced gore on the *Unrated Cut*. More importantly, however, the 4K presentation on *Unrated Cut* is noticeably sharper than the *Theatrical Cut* (or, for that matter, **Jason X**). While the *Theatrical Cut* often looks soft, and by design, the film's hues are bland, the picture on the *Unrated Cut* has the sheer, precise edges that the best 4K transfers impart, and hues are slightly improved, as well. Sometimes, just the pleasure of the crisp lines adds to the enjoyment of the mayhem and splatter, although frankly, the film needs all the help it can get. On both versions, the 5.1-channel DTS sound has a relatively older mix with basic separations and dull tones. Both platters have optional English subtitles and a 12-second introduction by Marcus. We reviewed New Line's DVD in Dec 04, which had a blander image, although the DVD's DTS sound is fairly close in quality to the sound on the Blu-rays.

The *Unrated Cut* comes with three commentary tracks. One track, with Marcus and screenwriter Dean Lorey, appeared on the DVD. A second track, with Marcus and Bracke, is fairly rewarding. Marcus talks about the film from a different perspective, with several decades having passed since the film was made. He explains his reasons for the various choices he made and recalls various things that happened on the shoot. Since he has been involved with teaching acting, he is especially sensitive to the needs and challenges that the cast members faced, and he points out that the best horror films often have terrific performances. "For some reason, there was a period of time where acting became less important to horror movies. I think there's nothing worse than putting acting as something in the background in these movies. I wanted this movie to have great performances. I wanted everyone to come out of this movie and have careers." He also describes how the producer wanted them to increase the speed of the film running through the camera just a tiny bit to help with the film stock budget, and the headaches that caused.

Felsher and Barton supply the third track, which is a little stronger than their talk on **Jason X**. It is still enthusiastic, but they speak more about the film's context and compare it to the other films in the series, share obscure technical details (the actor playing Jason had makeup on the sides of his face, in case his ever present hockey mask loosened for a moment or two) and generally stack up the film's pluses and minuses in the minds of fans, pointing out as well that the movie may play differently now than it did to eager adolescents seeing it for the first time. Or not.

The *Theatrical Cut* platter has a number of special features, including the 13 minutes of character enhancing additional footage, also featured on the DVD, that appeared in a TV release. For the Blu-ray, Marcus has added a commentary to the clips, generally enthusiastic about the material although he understands that it interfered with the pace of the violence. Also featured is an excellent 47-minute talk by Marcus that concisely lays out his history with Cunningham, his strategy for the film, his experiences making it and what he thinks of the result. "In the time after the movie came out, everybody started talking about **The Hidden** and that it was a lot like **The Hidden**, and for me, it was crazy, because I had not seen **The Hidden** before I shot the movie. I saw the movie after, because people went, 'Wow, it's a lot like **The Hidden**,' and I went, 'Is it? Huh. Okay.' And then I was like, 'Oh no, it's a lot like **The Hidden**.' So, everybody's right. Nobody's wrong about that. It's just, I didn't know." Also featured is a terrific 28-minute interview with Hodder, talking about his experiences in all of the films where he has played the Jason character (and also speaks about an amusing talk show visit in character); a 12-minute interview with Manfredini, explaining where he came up with the different cues in the score (including being inspired for one by a kiddie show he watched as a child); a nice 17-minute interview with makeup expert Robert Kurtzman explaining how many of the best splatter effects were executed; a really nice 12-minute interview with

costar Julie Michaels, who is featured in the film's wonderful opening teaser; a minute-long look at **Friday the 13th** props that have been gathered in a museum display; a trailer; thirteen TV commercials; and more than a hundred and fifty images of memorabilia in still frame.

Horror in the city

The 2024 entry in the **Quiet Place** series, **A Quiet Place Day One**, released on DVD by Paramount (UPC#191329261217, \$26), is not as enthralling as its two predecessors (Aug 18, Nov 21), but the basic concept is such a marvelous combination of science-fiction and suspense that the film, directed by Michael Sarnoski cannot fail to entertain. Lupita Nyong'o is a terminally ill cancer patient on an outing in Manhattan from her hospice care facility when the aliens attack. The aliens are hypersensitive to sound but cannot see or swim, which is convenient. The film actually takes place over the course of a couple of days, as she meets several other characters and works her way uptown to where she grew up. Joseph Quinn and Djimon Hounsou costar. She also has a cat. The best scream in the movie is a cheat—a brief dream—but there are several other good frights and a constant tension since the creatures could be hiding in any corner, waiting to strike. We don't know about you, but in a genuinely quiet room our body makes all sorts of noises, from creaking tendons to crunching bones, and even if we hold our breath, our heart carries on like a timpani. The filmmakers ignore this, just as they ignore the purring of the cat. The film basically substitutes the inventiveness of the first two features with the spectacle of the urban setting, and then cheats on that by holding its budget to a modest amount of death and destruction. Still, like we said, the premise is ultimately too entertaining to quibble about details, and we look forward to the next installment, whatever the filmmakers decide to do with it.

The film runs 99 minutes, but the end credits run a full 10 of those, and once the song sung by Nina Simone is over, you just get a decent medley of the film's score. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The color transfer looks okay. The image is a bit soft at times, but is generally fresh. The 5.1-channel Dolby Digital sound is where much of the entertainment resides, and it has a suitably engaging surround presence. There is a very busy audio track that describes the action ("They hurry across an open square littered with ash, debris and blood. They swivel, failing to locate the source of the sounds. Clouds obscure the buildings. They run for an office building and push into a large revolving door. A wedged briefcase jams the rotation."), alternate French and Spanish audio tracks, and optional English, French and Spanish subtitles.

The horrors of disfigured women

The best moments of French director George Franju's 1960 **Eyes without a Face** (*Les Yeux sans Visage*) call to mind a silent film. As the masked daughter of a doctor hesitantly glides through his mansion, the image is balletic, and is a great deal more captivating than the gooey gore rolling down a neck as the doctor operates on the face of an abducted woman so that he can transpose that face onto his damaged daughter. The gore aspects of the film were ahead of their time, but it is the lyrical abstractions that have remained timeless, and have enabled the movie to endure as more than just a squimpy thriller about an insane surgeon.

Pierre Brasseur, Alida Valli and Edith Scob star. We reviewed the Criterion Collection Blu-ray in Jul 14, and that disc has been included as the second platter in Criterion's 4K Blu-ray (UPC#715515320719, \$50). The black-and-white picture has an aspect ratio of about 1.66:1, and the image on the 4K platter is noticeably improved over the standard Blu-ray. The picture is sharper, less hazy and less grainy, and the presentation enhances the film's lyricism, which is aided as well by the wonderfully seductive Maurice Jarre musical score. The film's monophonic sound is also sharper on the 4K presentation, although the differences are subtler than the differences in the image. The film is in French with optional English subtitles. The standard BD also contains Franju's 1949 22-minute slaughterhouse documentary *Blood of the Beasts* (with both French and English audio tracks), a 5-minute interview with Franju, a 9-minute interview with Scob, a 7-minute interview with scenarists Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac, and two trailers.

A haunting 1961 samurai drama directed by Tai Kato, **The Tale of Oiwake's Ghost**, is available on Blu-ray from Radiance (UPC#760137181644, \$40). The film runs 94 minutes, with most of its running time setting up the story, in which a boorish samurai played by Tomisaburo Wakayama initially kills the father of his estranged wife (pretending the murder was done by someone else), so she will be obligated to return to him. He becomes impatient with his her, however, and eager to move on to a wealthier young woman who has become obsessed with him after a chance encounter. With the urging of the new woman's family, he gives his wife a potion that disfigures her, and then kills her, but you can't keep a good woman down and her spirit continues to bedevil him, causing no end of trouble. Once the characters become familiar, the story is fairly predictable, but the performances are so engaging that even though there really is not a single character that is genuinely sympathetic, their presence and interaction remains enjoyable. Additionally, the black-and-white cinematography, letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1, is consistently captivating, especially with the lovely, sharp and spotless transfer on the Blu-ray. There is one shot of a man fishing in a marsh at sunset that is stunning, and every scene is elegant, intriguing and mesmerizing. In the same way that you don't

mind the company of the characters, even as they do bad things to one another, the film itself is also lovely entertainment, despite it is inevitable horrors.

The monophonic sound is clean and there is a terrific traditional Japanese music score by Nanba Takahashi. The film is in Japanese with optional English subtitles and comes with a 9-minute appreciation of the film, presented as an *Introduction*, that explains how the story is a spin-off of **The 47 Ronin** (Sep 99); a similar 9-minute piece that analyzes Kato's approach to specific classic sequences; and a cute 7-minute montage that takes a couple of the film's climactic scenes and shows how they were interpreted in several different adaptations of the story.

Civil War horrors

Set during the Civil War, the 2025 Saban Films production, **Resurrection Road**, is a decent bait-and-switch horror tale released on Blu-ray by Well Go USA Entertainment (UPC#810348038951, \$32) that starts out being about a platoon of former slaves assigned to a suicide mission to blow up a Confederate fort and cannons. As they make their way through the woods, however, odd things begin to happen, all the more so after the sun sets. The film runs just 77 minutes, with 6 minutes of that being the unadorned end credits, and its brevity works against it—there are way too many loose story threads and unexplained conveniences—but the core premise is valid and nicely executed. The period detail establishes an engaging atmosphere that is then suitably enhanced by the ensuing frights. The film is violent and reasonably suspenseful, and the performances are consistently appealing. Directed by Ashley Cahill, Malcolm Goodwin, Furlly Mac and Triana Browne star, with a terrific guest appearance by the late Michael Madsen.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. The image is sharp and colors are finely detailed. Some of the computer effects are bland, but they are deliberately kept to brief glimpses. The 5.1-channel DTS sound has a pleasing dimensionality and terrific directional effects. There are optional English subtitles.

Horror, or an attempt at horror, in a mansion

A film that wants to scare you but doesn't entirely know how, **Whisper of the Witch**, has been released on Blu-ray by Well Go USA Entertainment (UPC#810348039071, \$32). Oh, there are a couple of decent jump scares, but directed by Serik Beyseu, the drama is convoluted and the staging is utterly lacking in flair. The film was shot in Russia with Russian actors, but has been dubbed in English, and while the lip movements often match the dialog, the line readings are lifeless. The character blocking is not much better, however, as each actor seems to do one movement or line of dialog at a time, and then waits a beat to do the next. It has an unintentional dulling effect and interferes with the attempts at surprise. A teenager with a group of friends disappears in an abandoned mansion. A detective who used to live nearby arrives from out of town to help with the investigation, while reminiscing with another detective about their own hijinks in the mansion in their day. It turns out there was trouble then, too, and it is all related. The detective also hooks up with an old flame, only to discover that both her house and the mansion, and other places, are linked by underground passageways, lorded over by an evil force that can be activated by cranking an old fashioned phonograph cylinder on a portable player. Running 95 minutes, past tragedies and present day tragedies converge, and the detective must make a sacrifice to save those who have been affected. There are special effects and a generally creepy atmosphere, but for every decent scare or unnerving moment in the film, there are a dozen that are ill timed or just not scary at all.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. The image transfer looks great, with clear details in even the faintest light. The 5.1-channel DTS sound is also reasonably forceful and nicely distributed. There are optional English subtitles and a trailer.

Horror, or an attempt at horror, in the woods

Three young couples off to a cabin in the woods (in Georgia) for a weekend party have some trouble with a ghost in the potentially entertaining **Fear Cabin The Last Weekend of Summer**, a Cleopatra Entertainment DVD (UPC#889466671296, \$20). Directed by Brian Krainson, who also has a part in the film (and several of the other cast members also have that same last name), there are a couple of terrific jump screams at first and a promising narrative about a woman who was hung in the same spot for witchcraft and whose spirit takes unkindly to visitors, especially when they relieve themselves on her grave. The plot, however, has nothing to add to this, and so the story just becomes confused and convoluted—the heroes, apparently, have dreams about other victims who visited the cabin, and then they begin hallucinating and killing one another. It doesn't help that there isn't enough coverage within the scenes. Not only do story ideas stop and change abruptly, but there is a particularly promising romance between two characters that happens mainly offscreen because they didn't get enough time in front of the camera to explore and develop their relationship. Meanwhile, around the fourteenth time or so that Krainson tries to slip in another jump scare, it just ain't scary any more. The film runs 80 minutes, except that the end credits start scrolling at the 67-minute mark, and even though they are interrupted at one point by a lengthy blooper reel, they are the slowest moving credits we have ever seen. A snail crawling up the screen of your TV would beat them to the top.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The picture is a little soft during

the many darker sequences and contrasts are a bit weak, but when there is plenty of light, the image is clear and sharp. The 5.1-channel Dolby Digital sound has a decent bass that surges now and then, and a workable dimensionality. There is no captioning. Also featured is a 2-minute montage of promotional stills, a trailer, a 4-minute introduction by Krainson (his background is stunts and he has a stunt business in Atlanta) and 7 minutes of decent behind-the-scenes footage with sound.