

# THE DVD LASER DISC NEWSLETTER

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## The ghoul-haunted woodland of Weir, in 4K

Poetry was far more intrinsic to life in English-speaking countries during the late Nineteenth Century that it is now. If you were to peruse newspapers of the time, you would see that common citizens often sent personally written poems to the newspapers regarding current events, and this is not surprising when you understand that the memorization and recitation of poetry was a core skill that was taught in schools throughout America and the British Empire, right along with arithmetic and history (both of which were also highly dependent upon memorization—indeed, before the invention of the printing press, history and poetry were one). What happened in the Twentieth Century? Well, you can probably blame Thomas Alva Edison for the collapse of Nineteenth Century values. His development of the phonograph not only eliminated the need for oratorical skills in daily living, it supplanted recitals in the dissemination of popular songs, while his development of motion pictures accelerated the importance of narrative structure exponentially in popular literature. Motion pictures are poems, of course. While they are designed with plots for their investment and marketing appeal, their visual component is inherently poetic, presenting a thesis and antithesis of images (or objects within images) to create emotional syntheses.

We've told this story before, but it is worth sharing again. Having seen advertisements and a review in *Variety*, we were aware of how unique a film Peter Weir's 1975 **Picnic at Hanging Rock** was long before its theatrical release in America (which actually occurred in 19—bloody—79, for crying out loud, after the release of Weir's more popular but still enigmatic following film, **The Last Wave**, encouraging American reviewers to compare the former to the latter rather than vice-versa). On vacation in London when the film was in release there shortly after its premiere, we saw that it was playing in a theater and we rushed that same evening to see it. We were absolutely spellbound, and came out of the theater in a genuine euphoric daze. There was an ice cream franchise across the street and we wandered inside to purchase a cone, chatting with a young woman as she put the cone together. We asked her if she had seen the film across the street and she replied, "No, but I heard it was shitty."

We immediately understood the logic of her response, because the film was not constructed to attract a mass audience. Australia had a film history and tradition that stretched back to the silent movie days, but financially, homegrown films could not compete with movies made in America or even Britain. Therefore, in the early Seventies, the Australian government instituted a tax benefit scheme that enabled and encouraged local film production, and this ignited what was generally acknowledged as the 'Australian New Wave.' Like the maturation of a person, Australia's film industry then went through its own adolescence. It began with beautiful, artistic and financially naive features, of which **Picnic at Hanging Rock** was the aesthetic apogee. That was then followed by a heady rush of exploitation features obsessed with sex and death, which was just gradually supplanted by a more mature focus on traditional and standardized popular films that nevertheless lost something of their unique Australian flavor in the process.

Films are poems, yes, but most are given a traditional narrative structure that audiences readily understand and accept—a hero striving for a goal, a villain presenting an obstacle, suspense as the two forces conflict, leading to a hopefully satisfying denouement. **Picnic at Hanging Rock** has a very clear story line—on Valentine's Day in 1900 (which was actually a Wednesday, or so the Internet tells us, and not a Saturday as the film claims—or maybe the movie just isn't taking place in this world)—several girls on a picnic organized by their boarding school disappear in the afternoon while exploring the wild terrain, and most are never found. But even in its clarity of expression, it does not have any sort of popularized story arc, although for those paying attention there are a number of goosebump-raising revelations as the film advances to its conclusion. To alter just slightly Edgar Allan Poe's words that materialize as the film's opening voiceover introduction, **Picnic at Hanging Rock** is a poem within a poem. It is a mesmerizing look at the lives of young women in the Victoria Era, evoking the

exploration and suppression of sexuality, the historical sociology of its setting (at the time, Australia was Britain first and Australia a distant second), and the ephemeral nature of spirit and the unknown by presenting, with absolute beauty and a stunningly precise evanescence of motion picture components, the melding of images, sounds, human presence and nature. The film utilizes its narrative to provide an effective momentum for its poetic components, but its purpose is the poetry and not the narrative.

Thus, the better transcription of the film, the more powerfully its impact will be upon the viewer, and to that end, The Criterion Collection has released **Picnic at Hanging Rock** as a 4K Blu-ray (UPC#715515294614, \$50). We reviewed Criterion's previously definitive standard Blu-ray in Jan 15. That release came with a paperback copy of Joan Lindsay's novel, better for providing 'clues' to what actually happened to the girls, although that is really just kind of a teasing bluff, since it is the remarkable blend of imagery, subject and performances, and not its literary source, that forms the core of the movie's artistic brilliance. The 4K platter is accompanied by the standard Blu-ray platter released before, but has not been packaged with the novel.

In an established pattern that has become more and more concerning, Criterion's 4K releases almost consistently have more subdued hues than their standard Blu-ray counterparts, and that is what occurs on **Picnic**, although as is often the case as well, the subliminal improvements to the detail of the image even out the relative subjugation of the colors. In general, the exteriors have a more dried, summer look than they did on the standard BD, and fleshtones are less pinkish in the outdoors, as well. The interiors still have instances of rich, deep reds and vividly realistic facial tones. Watched without comparison to the standard BD, the 4K presentation is a transcendent experience that conveys Weir's aesthetic perfection directly to the heart and soul of the observer. Even though the additional color is at times more pleasing, and the level of playback is still exceptional, the standard BD does not achieve the same pure response of ethereal sublimation, although it comes very close to it.

The standard BD was letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1 and runs 107 minutes, while the 4K presentation has an aspect ratio of about 1.66:1 and runs 108 minutes (restoration credits have been included at the end), adding a slight amount of picture information to the top and bottom of the image and losing just a tiny sliver from the right side. It is the more proper framing for the film, although the differences are emotionally negligible. The 5.1-channel DTS has no distinctive improvements. The audio is mostly centered, in any case. There is a lovely, and although not aggressive, still eerie and disturbing bass, along with a handful of directional effects. More importantly, Gheorghe Zamfir's panflute has an appropriately untethered dimensionality that is key to setting the film's otherworldly atmosphere. There are optional English subtitles, and on the standard BD are the supplements we reviewed previously—a 9-minute introduction, a 25-minute interview with Weir, a 30-minute retrospective interview with cast and crew members, a 26-minute production featurette and Weir's 1971 beginning black-and-white film, *Homesdale*, a comedy running 50 minutes.

## Gold Star

Action, humor, stars, special effects and directorial finesse—all of these can contribute to a film's appeal, but there is another factor as well, the film's manner of presentation. On home video, when a transfer is really, really good, the presentation can take an already good movie and send it soaring with the viewer's pleasure, and that would be the case with the outstanding Arrow Video transfer of Anthony Mann's lovely 1957 Paramount western released on Blu-ray, **The Tin Star** (UPC#760137145936, \$40). Shot in VistaVision, a widescreen process that often feels like it was created deliberately for modern television screens, the film may be in black and white, but even though it consists only of varying shades of grey, the depth of field sharpness of the image, whether it is wilderness vistas or close-ups of Henry Fonda, are utterly captivating. Letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1, the western sets, the bit players in their costumes, the horses, and the other stars, including Anthony Perkins, John McIntire, Betsy Palmer, Neville Brand and Lee Van Cleef, practically leap out of the screen because the VistaVision processing combined with the Blu-ray playback is so sharp and immediate. It brings the entire milieu and sequential tableaux to life.

## Star (Continued)

The presentation is so crisp that it calls to mind Arrow's outstanding transfer of **The Apartment** (Mar 18), but then, it does **The Apartment** one better, by providing the movie with a 5.1-channel DTS audio track that matches the picture in excellence. We reviewed Paramount's DVD in Jul 08, and while its picture was uneven and speckled, it did have a very nice 5.1-channel Dolby mix. The DTS takes that mix onto the Blu-ray, enriching and sharpening every sound. There is a beautiful Elmer Bernstein musical score, and on the BD, you can hear each instrument distinctly in the orchestration, which then sends goosebumps down your back when they all swell together with Bernstein's classic flourishes. There are some directional effects and a wonderful ambient surround presence, so that even when the music isn't thrilling you, the other noises are.

Fonda is a bounty hunter who brings a corpse with a price on his head into town and Perkins is a newbie sheriff who realizes he could use some pointers when it comes to facing off against bad guys, which comes in handy when the bad guys show up. The script had several writers but it has a wonderful, textbook construction that ties every piece together, while allowing the viewer to savor the characters and the Old West setting. The set designs are exceptionally good, and Mann takes full advantage of them—as we pointed out in our DVD review, the sheriff's office is situated so that its picture window is essentially in the middle of main street. Visually, from the faces of the cast members to the staging of each scene, the images in the film are as rousing as the drama and the action. Running 93 minutes, **The Tin Star** makes you feel warm and happy and excited from beginning to end, and the Blu-ray magnifies each of those feelings.

Along with optional English subtitles and a trailer, there is a great (and comprehensive) French photo-comic in still frame, a terrific 13-minute montage of memorabilia set to a lovely suite of Bernstein's score, another 14-minute montage of publicity stills also set to more of Bernstein's score (between the two of them, it appears to be the complete soundtrack), a wonderful and outstanding 32-minute interview with Bernstein's son Peter about his life and music, and a very nice 28-minute appreciation of the film and the talents of the artists who made it.

Westerns expert Toby Roan supplies a decent commentary track, going over the career profiles of many members of the cast and crew, talking about the film's production history and subsequent success, and covering at least a few details of its artistry. "From the acting to the directing, there's a real feeling of confidence throughout this film. Everybody involved seems to really know what they're doing. Now look at this shot, courtesy of the deep focus of VistaVision. All that action, all that movement can happen in a single shot. Think about how scenes are blocked in most movies. Characters seem to move horizontally most of the time, pace back and forth in an office or drive left to right or right to left. With VistaVision, it's very easy to have actors move front to back or vice versa, because they never go out of focus."

## Biographical thrills

When a racecar blows a tire and goes sailing through the air in a horrific crash, it is thrilling cinema, but it is also thrilling cinema to follow a camera into a kitchen and recognize that the set has been designed to perfection for its time period, its locale and the personality of the character who owns it. Michael Mann's outstanding and woefully underrated 2023 feature, **Ferrari**, a Neon Decal release (UPC#84350-1042267, \$22), is thrilling cinema from beginning to end, all 130 minutes of it. It is a biographical profile of the specialty car manufacturer, Enzo Ferrari, during a crisis point in his life in the mid-Fifties. Not only is his company near bankruptcy and must win the next race—a cringe-inducing cross-country speed race through Northern Italy—but his wife, who has an equal ownership in the company, has just learned that he is raising a child with his mistress. The film compacts everything into several weeks in his life, but not only does it create an indelible profile of the man behind the car, it also presents a steadily engaging drama at every turn as the story unfolds. There is eventually the race, and a crash as frighteningly gory as the one in **Final Destination**, but the film's true thrills are in the masterful perfection of its set and location designs (yes, there is one establishing shot that could possibly have a modern structure or two, but you'd have to hit pause and then use a magnifying glass to identify them; there is also a television in a rural household, which is highly unlikely for Italy in the Fifties, but not absolutely impossible), the cars themselves, of course, the movie's concise dramatic structure and the wonderful Italian-in-English performances of Adam Driver, Penélope Cruz and Shailene Woodley. Gabriel Leone and Patrick Dempsey co-star. They bring their characters to life and Mann puts them through their paces with a gripping but urbane immediacy. The film is as sleek and classy as its automobile namesake, and has been engineered with the same lust for precision and optimal satisfaction.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. The colors are captivating, Mann's image compositions are consistently balanced and involving, and the picture is always sharp. The 5.1-channel Dolby Digital sound has a pleasing directional mix with an engaging clarity and smoothness. There is an audio track that describes the action ("Linda, Enzo and de Portago lean against a 350. The crowd takes photos. Enzo smiles slightly. Enzo looks at the car around Linda, puts his arm around her bottom half and pulls her close, revealing the Ferrari logo on the car. Linda glowers at him. De Portago crosses his arms."), optional English and Spanish subtitles, two trailers and 20 minutes of nice promotional featurettes.

## Blu Beauty

Not every kung fu movie ever made has been released in a restored condition on Blu-ray, of course, but the market has reached something of a saturation point and the films are not appearing as profusely as they were even a year ago. On the other hand, the proliferation of kung fu films has educated the marketplace (the special features help, too!) about Chinese filmmaking and the general history of Chinese martial arts and costume films. Hence, 88 Films has taken a very daring and exciting step by releasing a movie on Blu-ray that represents, with great spectacle, popular Chinese filmmaking before the Seventies kung fu films startled the world, the 1965 historical epic directed by Han-Hsiang Li, **Hsi Shih: Beauty of Beauties** (UPC# 760137143086, \$40). It is

our deepest and most sincere hope that this release will start a trend that opens up the American marketplace to an entire array of amazing Chinese cinema, because that cinema is very different than the movies we are accustomed to seeing and it is its freshness that is so exciting. That said, the film will be a challenge for viewers not primed by the descendant mutations that enabled a more immediate international appeal.

The 155-minute film opens on a beach littered with carnage from a recent battle. The camera follows along and there are hints of activity in the far background. It eventually swings up and into a village, resting on a shot of a child traumatized by the massacre surrounding him that looks eerily like the famous news photo taken of the child burned with napalm in Vietnam in 1972, except, of course, it was staged 7 years previous to that. After this promising start, however, the film settles for a while into a confusing array of post-battle conversations between the conquerors and the conquered, with a cast of hundreds in the background, marching to and fro. Letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1, the widescreen imagery is compelling, aided by the consistently splendid production designs and glorious costumes, and it is clear the film has a robust sense of purpose, but it is only after an hour of meetings and a couple of song numbers that the semblance of a plot comes into view. The heroine, played by Ching Chiang, has agreed to be sent to the conquering leader to distract him while her country rebuilds its strength for a return engagement. That plot includes one of our favorite tropes—the henchman who sees the truth when his boss does not, but cannot no matter how hard he tries persuade his boss that the hero (in this case, the heroine) is pulling a fast one—and it is done so well that you genuinely feel sorry for the guy even though he is one of the primary villains.

The Taiwanese production was originally much longer and the version that has been restored comes from the only surviving source material, but it is impossible to ignore the leaps the story takes and the gaps that occur as events steamroll ahead from one grand spectacle to the next. There are virtually no action sequences or fight scenes (except a little bit in the final 10 minutes) and even Chiang's character kind of evaporates after a while. At its best, it is reminiscent of **The Fall of the Roman Empire**, and there is enough going on that fans will definitely be tempted to revisit it (the more often you watch it, the more you understand who is who and what is happening, and can then relax and admire how it is all staged), but others will feel frustrated with the film's "all dressed up and nowhere to go" shortcomings.

The film is in Mandarin and there are optional English subtitles. The monophonic sound is rather fascinating, because sometimes it appears that the actors were recorded in a large echo chamber that does not in any way match the locales where they are talking. The only musical numbers are those two at the beginning, and a very sweet sequence where Chiang ascends a musical staircase. At times the picture looks fantastic. It is sharp and colors are always fresh and vivid. At other times, the image is much softer, and sometimes this happens from one shot to the next, but like the movie's running time, one has to assume that a great effort has gone into restoring what was available and this was the very best the restorers could accomplish. A 6-minute side-by-side before and after comparison between the source material and the restoration is included. Along with a trailer, there is also a game 22-minute talk by Asian film expert Tony Rayns, who dances around the movie's deficiencies and focuses primarily on Li's significant and largely forgotten career.

## 3 times two

The 1948 John Ford Technicolor MGM western, **3 Godfathers**, has been paired on a Turner Entertainment Co. Warner Bros. *Warner WB Archive Collection* Blu-ray (UPC#840418303382, \$22) with Richard Boleslawski's 1936 black-and-white MGM version, **Three Godfathers**. The only other special feature on the single-platter release is a trailer for the 1936 production, and both films have optional English subtitles.

Both films are surprisingly enjoyable given the premise, but of the two, **Three Godfathers** is the better film and is very much worth watching first. Chester Morris stars with Lewis Stone and Walter Brennan as three bank robbers who come across an abandoned covered wagon in the desert while on their getaway and discover a newborn infant, which they start caring for despite themselves. Running 81 minutes, the film is serious and hard edged—Stone's performance is especially rewarding—and includes one of the most amazing child performances ever directed on film (apparently by a single baby, Jean Kirchner, and not twins). The baby's performance is catnip, and countermands the concept of hardened killers being presented as heroes, although that is exactly what is happening. To that end, Morris is also wonderfully cast specifically because he is not very appealing, and so the change that goes through the soul of his character is all the more compelling. You really are fighting with yourself to sympathize with him, only to give in grudgingly when his character makes the ultimate commitments. (Brennan is Brennan, and his specific movie skill was to fit in anywhere even though he doesn't seem like he ought to; Sidney Toler and Irene Hervey are also featured.) The story is tough—two of the characters commit suicide even though suicide was a no-no with the Production Code—but its various, seemingly diverse components come together brilliantly. It's challenging entertainment, but it's good.

The squared full screen black-and-white image is often strikingly composed, which also adds to a viewer's subconscious pleasures—particularly since the transfer looks very nice with minimal wear. The monophonic sound is reasonably clean.

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It is then best to take a break of a day or two and not jump into Ford's film immediately. The squared full screen image looks gorgeous, with nary a flaw, and quite surprisingly, the monophonic sound is on par with the image, well worth amplifying for the strength and clarity that it conveys. Ford makes the star, John Wayne, work like hell, delivering lengthy monologues at more than one point without a cut. Indeed, those who discount Wayne's acting skills need take just one look at this film and they will be silenced. His two companions are played by Pedro Armendariz and Harry Carey, Jr., and while the posse in the first film gave up early on, it plays a larger part here, led by Ward Bond with Hank Worden and (although not saying much) Ben Johnson following along. Jane Darwell, Mae Marsh and Guy Kibbee are also featured. Ford uses a more believably newborn child, but the baby isn't really seen interacting with the actual stars and, more awkwardly, they just use a stiff, wrapped up doll for the medium shots (Hollywood ought to be more creative than that—an inner tube filled with water and tied in thirds or something would give the actors so much more to work with). Running 106 minutes, there is a great deal to admire about the film, from Wayne's performance to the harsh locations and lovely color cinematography. We will even give the creators the benefit of the doubt and assume that the ultra copout ending was imposed upon them. For every hokey Ford touch in the film, there are three or four inspired moments. Despite the groan-worthy conclusion, the film is satisfying entertainment and is mostly a worthy supplement to the starkness of its companion feature.

We reviewed Warner's previous release of **3 Godfathers** in Jun 06 and their release of *Three Godfathers* paired with an even earlier and franker adaptation of the Peter B. Kyne novel, **Hell's Heroes/Three Godfathers**, in Sep 11. In both instances, the fresh picture transfers on the BD are a notable improvement over the reasonably good looking DVDs.

### Nostalgic boxing

It is hard to imagine Errol Flynn in a contemporary boxing movie. He doesn't have the build for it, and while his dramatics were suitable for war films and westerns, he would still seem like a fish out of water in the ring. But a period boxing film, one set in the Nineteenth Century, is perfect for him, because he can take his swashbuckling cartoon hero image and just shift a tiny bit to make it work. Raoul Walsh directed the 1942 **Gentleman Jim** (with editing by Don Siegel!), a playful and heavily nostalgic Warner Bros. depiction of the rise of the boxing champion Jim Corbett, and it was an ideal part for Flynn, who readily finesses his way through the boxing scenes that are meant to depict the beginnings, really, of 'modern' boxing. With Ward Bond filling in as John L. Sullivan, the reigning champ that Corbett bested, and similarly exaggerated opponents leading up to him, the film falls together smoothly and joyfully. Flynn's cohort on many films, Alan Hale, plays his father here, with Jack Carson filling in the awkward part of his 'best friend' (the part serves a purpose in the movie's first half and then just sort of disappears) and Alexis Smith as an appropriate love interest so that the film can end on a romcom note and justify all the boxing scenes. William Frawley, John Loder and Arthur Shields are also featured. Running 104 minutes, the film is relaxed and energetic, using the ego of its hero for comedic momentum, with the action of the fight sequences bridging each advancement in his emotional development.

Turner Entertainment and Warner Bros. have released the film as a *WB Warner Archive Collection* Blu-ray (UPC#810134947443, \$22). The full screen black-and-white picture is smooth, sharp and spotless, which adds to the inherent entertainment of the program by never offering an impediment to its lovely staging and marvelous players. The monophonic sound is fine and there are optional English subtitles. Along with a trailer, there is a 9-minute color *Merrie Melodies* cartoon from 1942, *The Dover Boys at Pimento University* or *The Rivals of Roquefort Hall*, a spoof on nostalgia for life in the Nineties (shouldn't that be kicking in again, sometime soon?); an 8-minute color *Merrie Melodies* cartoon from 1942, *Foney Fables*, an anthropological spoof of popular fairy tales and fables; a 7-minute black-and-white *Looney Tunes* cartoon from 1942, *Hobby Horse-Laffs*, a collection of blackout gags using the theme of characters practicing popular hobbies; and a *Screen Guild Players* radio adaptation of the feature film from 1944 with Flynn, Smith and Bond (in a definitive audio performance) running a breathlessly abridged 30 minutes.

### Pre-code romance

Warner Bros., and through Warner Bros., MGM and RKO, and Universal, and through Universal, Paramount, have released all sorts of black-and-white films from the Thirties on Blu-ray, but the Columbia Pictures films controlled by Sony Pictures Home Entertainment have been less forthcoming, and it is for that reason that Sony's release on Blu-ray of the 1933 pre-Code proto-screwball comedy, **Cocktail Hour** (UPC#043396636392, \$25), merits heralding. The disc has no menu, but optional English subtitles can be activated by the subtitling button. As one is aware from the films that the other companies have put out, very early romances sometimes have a backhand-to-forehead tone to them and **Cocktail Hour**, directed by Victor Schertzinger, straddles the advances that were being made in the genre. The film's comedic material is energetic and 'modern,' while its more serious romantic component is a bit more haughty and reserved. Bebe Daniels stars as a wildly successful advertising illustrator who wants to get away from work and her boss—played by Randolph Scott—for a while, even though of all the men who are falling over themselves to woo her, he is the one she likes the best. She takes a liner from New York to England (when they disembark, the stock shots are still of New York, but that's okay, since a shot during a romantic scene shows the boat sailing toward the setting sun) and meets an aristocratic industrialist, only to find out once they arrive that he hasn't been entirely forthcoming about their relationship. The film runs a brisk 73 minutes and at one point, for a couple of minutes, lost footage is substituted with still photos as the original audio track plays over it. Scott is terrific and it is a shame he is gone for so much of the film's center (his character continually sends her telegrams so that we remember he exists). Like her character, Daniels is a beacon of maturity amid archaic attitudes and childish behaviors, and while the film does not ultimately amount to much, the cast is appealing and the film is over before it starts to wear out its welcome.

The squared full screen black-and-white picture looks quite nice, all things considered. The image is smooth, free of overt wear and is reasonably sharp. The monophonic sound is adequate for the film's age. Sidney Blackmer, Muriel Kirkland and Barry Norton co-star.

### Trial spoof

Isabelle Huppert has at last arrived at the point in her career where she portrays dowagers, and she is just as inspired and surprising in her performances now as she was back when she was a teenager. She plays a Gloria Swanson-type forgotten silent actress in the highly amusing 2022 French spoof about a murder trial and its aftermath, **The Crime Is Mine**, a Music Box Films Blu-ray (UPC#75177895-2014, \$35). Directed by François Ozon, Nadia Tereszkiewicz (as the defendant) and Rebecca Marder (as her lawyer and roommate) star in the feature, and both deliver wonderful, energetic performances that make the film a real treat. If you are paying close attention, you also see Huppert in the movie's opening moments, and if you don't, well, no matter, because when she does show up, it is like icing on the cake. The film begins with a theater curtain drawing back on a real swimming pool and fancy house, and the title card that tells you it is 1934 is relegated to the 4 minutes of enjoyable deleted scenes that are part of the supplement, so it comes as a real shock when after a decent amount of business, Tereszkiewicz's character crosses a street and it is filled with period automobiles. You never would have guessed. But that is the essence of the film, which is otherwise best left to be discovered. Running 102 minutes, the scenes often feel more like they are being played on a stage rather than in a movie. But Ozon just wants to keep you disoriented by the occasional superficialities so that your guard is down and you are exposed to the humor, since otherwise everyone appears to be acting seriously, or, at least, as seriously as they can.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1. The color transfer, as we may have implied, is if anything too good looking, bringing a slight artificiality to its bright, sharp hues and accurate fleshtones. The DTS sound has a workable dimensionality, and the film is in French with optional English subtitles. Along with a trailer and a hefty 2-minute montage of poster concepts, there are 6 minutes of lighting and costume tests (the actresses seem to be having great fun), an enormous 19 minutes of bloopers (primarily of actors blowing their lines), 5 minutes of enjoyable deleted scenes, 16 minutes of decent interviews with Ozon and the cast, and 42 minutes of really good behind-the-scenes footage that show Ozon making decisions and adjustments ("You're supposed to be tired! You walked up four flights of stairs!").

### Ghost

An anxiety-inducing ghost story from schlock master Bert I. Gordon, **Tormented**, has been released on a Special Edition Blu-ray with a host of special features by Film Masters (UPC#760137145905, \$25). Richard Carlson stars as a jazz pianist summing on an island and about to be married when an old girlfriend shows up, threatens him with love letters, falls off the lighthouse where they are having their tense conversation, and then starts haunting him as the wedding gets closer to fruition. The film runs just 74 minutes but you want it to be over with as soon as possible, because the hero's quest for happiness is continually frustrated by the very irritating spirit and he just can't catch a break. Gordon's special effects are at times blatant and at times reasonably clever (how do they do that footprints in the sand thing?), so one can imagine the film being enjoyable at a drive-in with distractions, but since the point is not horror but guilt, the film's appeal is limited. Juli Reding, Lugene Sanders, Susan Gordon, Joe Turkel and Harry Fleeer co-star. Fleeer is dubbed by Paul Frees, a voice you will recognize immediately.

The black-and-white picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. While there is a fairly constant vertical line near the center, it is often covered over with digital disguises, which is kind of ironic in that the technology being used to clean up the image is a great deal more sophisticated than the technology being used to present the ghost. On the whole, the picture is relatively smooth and distractions are minimal. The monophonic sound is adequate and there are optional English subtitles and two trailers.

It is rare that a **Mystery Science Theater 3000** program will be longer than the film it is spoofing, but that was the case with **Tormented** and another reason to consider the Blu-ray, since the 92-minute episode from 1992 has also been included. A couple of the gags generate a chuckle, but fans of the series will be especially pleased with the decent looking transfer and a chance to match their own irreverent reactions to the film against those in the show. The segment is also supported by the subtitling.

Also featured is a terrific 39-minute look at Bert Gordon's career, with lots of great clips and a decent analysis of his production choices and his artistic growth, especially during the Fifties and Sixties. Additionally, there is an 8-minute interview with Gordon himself about his career. There is also a 4-minute clip of an unused TV pilot Gordon created, *Famous Ghost Stories*, featuring a spectral Vincent Price as the show's bookending host. The first episode was to have been an abridged version of **Tormented**. Price is wonderful. In an otherwise padded 20-minute analysis of the film's thematic constructs, there is an interesting and on-the-mark comparison between the film and **Play Misty for Me**, although the piece fails to point out that the clips from the **Play Misty for Me** trailer being used are being narrated by...Frees. Spooky, for sure.

Finally, there is a commentary track by horror film expert Gary Rhodes, who loves the film and tries to explain why, ultimately deciding that the ghost story is appealing, while Gordon's many special effects are celebratory of his career as a whole. He goes over the lives of Gordon and the cast and he has a special affection for Turkel, whom he talks about at great length. After running out of topics, he turns to going over other movies about ghosts and other movies involving lighthouses, even playing an audio clip of horror fan Larry Blamire providing even more examples of the latter. The commentary also has its own subtitle track.

## Silent features

Salesgirl movies were a dime a dozen in the silent era, and they all had pretty much the same plot—the girl working the department store in some way or another attracts the attention of the owner's son—but the device was a dependable audience pleaser and there are many enjoyable films that all used that template. Take the 1929 First National feature, *Why Be Good?*, the anchor film of the Warner Bros. *Warner WB Archive Collection Silent Classics Double Feature* Blu-ray, **The Boob / Why Be Good?** (UPC#840418303368, \$22). Colleen Moore, in total flapper mode, plays the department store salesgirl, and Neil Hamilton is storeowner's son, who meets her out dancing the night before his first day on the job as a personnel supervisor. When she comes in late the next day, he calls her to his office to chastise her tardiness, not knowing who she is until he looks up from his papers. And it goes on from there.

The best silent films are, to coin a phrase, clear spoken. Since they must communicate a narrative visually, the really good ones convey the intentions and feelings of the characters distinctly and yet maturely, so that viewers eagerly follow the ideas being presented to them rather than dismissing obvious or overplayed emotions of the moment. Such films are then embellished with wit and intrigue, through everything from action to visual design. Directed by William A. Seiter and running 81 minutes, *Why Be Good?* is utterly charming and engaging from beginning to end. The sets and costumes may be subdued by First National's budgets, but there is still a distinctive creativity that has an immediate visual impact. There is a dance party that is staged as if it had been lifted from **Pandora's Box** (Dec 07), even though the narrative is pointedly opposite of that more famous film's moral pessimism. But most importantly, every performance in the film is exceptional. It is not just that you immediately know what is going on in the mind of every character, it is like you are privy to their thoughts, you are sharing their impulses and feelings, and you see and sympathize with every single point of view, regardless of how those points of view conflict with one another. Moore was one of the great and forgotten flappers, and her presence is of course the heart and soul of the film, but we would rather single out Hamilton for exceptional praise. As the Thirties and later decades progressed, he found steady work on Poverty Row and then basically capped off a hefty but disregarded career with his witty and tone-perfect performance as Commissioner Gordon in the Sixties **Batman** TV series (Feb 15). But in *Why Be Good?* he delivers a genuine movie star performance as the youthful, handsome and intelligent but vulnerable hero. His movements and facial expressions communicate not only the psychology of his character, but the 'realness' of his character's presence and choices, and he is riveting every moment he is on the screen.

By 1929 silent films had their own audio tracks, and what this means here is that the movie has genuine Twenties music to accompany its party scenes, including songs, playing in the background, as it were, that have lyrics. There are also a few scattered sound effects. All of the dialog, on the other hand, is still supplied by the intertitles. The monophonic audio track is reasonably clean and well worth amplifying since, unlike scores that have been applied after the fact, it comes with the movie. The full screen black-and-white picture is aged to varying degrees from one scene to the next, but always conveys an impression of crispness and clarity. Most importantly, what wear there is never interferes with the connection the viewer is making with the cast.

So, obviously, MGM's 1926 *The Boob* has the more salable title, although it works best as a warm up film before the main feature. William Wellman directed the cute 61-minute program, which is less consequential and much messier than *Why Be Good?*, enabling the two films to complement one another effectively. Set in kind of a rural area, George K. Arthur plays a hapless but earnest farmhand whose girl, played by Gertrude Olmstead, is being romanced by a slick bootlegger. Hoping to make a good impression and encouraged by an alcoholic friend played by comedian Charles Murray, he gets dressed up in a movie-style cowboy outfit and rides off to bust the bootleggers running a local restaurant that hides its liquor in phony books on bookshelves in the dining area. Joan Crawford co-stars, but it would be spoiling things to say what she plays. There is also a major part of a young farmhand played by an uncredited African-American, who is buddies with Arthur and Murray's characters, and there is a very talented dog that bites the rears of the villains and doesn't let go. Best known for his serious dramas—and there is a viable subplot about a home for impoverished elderly women—Wellman dives into the spirit of the film, weaving together different threads of various comedic intensity, from Murray's character downing every bottle that he finds to Arthur's character struggling with his horse and outfit, and to the nonsensical but clearly uncouth activities of the bootleggers. If parts of the film seem dated or antique, they mesh well enough with the parts that have an enduring humor to make the entire film wholly likable in a silly but engaging manner.

The full screen black-and-white picture has no significant shortcomings and is in decent condition. There is a deft slow motion sequence that is integrated with regular motion footage to suggest that the dog has become inebriated. The film is accompanied by a fresh and pleasant piano score.

## Goodbye to Godard

The passing of Jean-Luc Godard in 2022 allows fans and scholars to finally put his entire filmmaking career in a proper perspective, and to that end, Cyril Leuthy has made a 2023 profile, **Godard Cinema**, that has been released on Blu-ray by Kino Lorber as **Godard Cinema and Trailer of a Film That Will Never Exist: Phony Wars** (UPC#738329265472, \$30). Packed with film and production clips, and including interviews with many of his now aged collaborators from Anna Karina to Hanna Schygulla, the program runs 105 minutes. True, the entire initial hour covers the Sixties, but it was the Sixties that catapulted Godard to the cinematic Pantheon. He essentially opened an untapped mine of motion picture artistic potential and proceeded to grab all that he could carry before anyone else had any idea how he got there. It was a desire to provoke that fueled his output, but his node invariably began to include impurities as his provocations shifted from cinema to politics, and eventually the mine played out. The film then covers his retreat from fame in the Seventies, and his discovery of video and the liberation that format created for him to make commercially

friendly features in the Eighties without compromising his creativity or artistic standards. The documentary also advances in its final minutes to look at where he turned next in the Nineties and beyond, although it does not broach his last explorations, such as his groundbreaking experiments with 3D.

For any Godard enthusiast, the film is a terrific treat, not just reminding the viewer of many wonderful cinematic moments, but also sharing terrific behind-the-scenes footage and warm reflections and insights from those who worked with him and have allowed time to gloss over any animosities. The picture is letterboxed with a varied aspect ratio depending upon the clips and the image quality is always impressive. The 5.1-channel DTS sound has a mild dimensionality for its filler musical score and is primarily in French with optional English subtitles.

A supplement considered so significant it has been included in the disc's title, *Trailer of a Film That Will Never Exist: Phony War*, released in 2023, is apparently one of the last films that Godard completed (sort of). Running 21 minutes, it is mostly a montage of collages against a white background (imprinted with, 'Canon,' as if it were being composed on a scanner or something), although there is one 'live action' montage (including footage from *Suave qui peut (la vie)*—see below) in the middle, showing a young woman on a bicycle in Swiss locations. The collages have notes, photos and clips of text that refer perhaps to a proposed film. Ostensibly, the piece is a promo reel, of sorts. For the first 5 minutes, there is no sound at all, but suddenly there is, which comes across warmly and purely on the 5.1-channel DTS track. The image is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.5:1, and presumably the colors, which are bright and clear, are accurate. The optional English subtitles do their best to keep up with the text on the screen, along with the occasional snippets of dialog and comments on the audio track. All told, it is an abstract piece, but playful. Also featured are trailers for both the documentary and Godard's film, and a rewarding 10-minute interview with Lila Lakshmanan, who worked with Godard in the cutting room on all of his early films and talks about her life and her experiences with him.

Once in a while, folks ask us to explain Godard or offer an approach to his movies, and one piece of advice we often volunteer is, "Whatever you do, don't watch **Breathless** first." We would recommend **A Woman Is a Woman** (which badly needs to come out on Blu-ray) or several other of his films from the mid-Sixties. **Breathless (A Bout de Souffle)**, about a jovial cop killer, is okay if you happen to catch it on a lark, but if you watch it in the context of wanting to behold a motion picture classic or to tackle Godard from his beginnings, it will be disappointing. At first it feels like a regional film shot on a shoestring budget, but then the scenes and the filmmaking techniques reveal themselves as too elaborate and masterful to sustain the guise of sloppiness. Jean-Paul Belmondo and Jean Seberg star. The excitement of the film when it first appeared in 1960 was in the kinetic sense of discovery that it offered, creating, really, a parallel between the anarchism the characters are experiencing on the screen and what the viewer was experiencing apprehending them. The 90-minute film has none of the intrusions of text upon images that would soon become a hallmark in Godard's radical and seductive style, and, in movie lover terms, it is an ultimate in acquired taste.

The Criterion Collection released a Blu-ray presentation of **Breathless A Film by Jean-Luc Godard** that we reviewed in Feb 11. Subsequent to that, however, they released the film again in a three-platter combination DVD and Blu-ray set (UPC#715515111515, \$40) and then as a two-platter 4K Blu-ray (UPC#71551528-5216, \$50). The actual BD platter in all three releases is the same. The film is in French with optional English subtitles, and the monophonic sound has a generally pleasing clarity. The squared full screen black-and-white image is fairly grainy but in keeping with the movie's makeshift spirit. The image on the DVD is actually much smoother and while it is not as sharp, it often looks nicer, except that, unlike the BD, the subtitling has a computer-like typescript that is rather annoying. The monophonic sound is also weaker. The 4K platter has grain, yes, and is somewhat darker than the standard BD and DVD images, but on the whole, it has the sharpest and most detailed image, which will enable a viewer's subconscious to be less resistant to Godard's experiments.

The special features contained on each of the standard BD platters also appear on the DVD platters, including a trailer, 27 minutes of archival interviews (both appear on the first DVD platter, what follows appears on the second platter), a 78-minute retrospective documentary, a 19-minute profile of Seberg, a 22-minute interview with cinematographer Raoul Coutard and assistant director Pierre Rissient, an 11-minute analysis of the film's style, an 11-minute examination of the film's references to other films and general culture, and Godard's 1959 13-minute black-and-white short with Belmondo, *Charlotte et son Jules*. Criterion's elaborate jacket insert in each set also features the original screen treatment Godard worked on with François Truffaut—and to that end, has anyone ever called Godard out for having the news hawkers in the film shout, "France Soir! France Soir!"?

Godard's next film, **Le Petit Soldat**, addressing French right wing politics, caused such an uproar in France that it was not released theatrically until 1963 and is also available on Blu-ray by Criterion (UPC#715515240215, \$40). It has a coherent narrative, essentially expanding upon what worked in the previous film (including lengthy scenes set in a hotel or small apartment) and abandoning the ideas that didn't work as well. You can also see Godard's interest in presenting text on film begin to germinate. Michel Subor stars as an AWOL French soldier living in Switzerland—the film was shot in Geneva and Lausanne—who is pressured by French Right wing agents to assassinate a professor sympathetic to the Arab cause. When he chickens out, they torture him to find out if he is working for the Left and then up the ante by abducting his girlfriend, played by Karina in her Godard debut. Running 88 minutes, the film essentially catalogs the different methods of torture that the French employed in Algeria, showing lightly but explicitly how each method is applied. It is Godard's use of Karina as a confectionate counter balance to the meatier political discourse that makes the 88-minute film palatable, just as his breathless tours of Geneva and its environs help to break up the lengthy but competently staged, cramped room sequences.



The squared full screen black-and-white picture is soft at times, but is free of damage. We reviewed a Wellspring DVD in Apr 03 that looked pretty good, but the BD is sharper and the monophonic sound is stronger. The film is in French with optional English subtitles, and comes with a really good and thoughtful 1963 interview with Subor in a boxing gym running 14 minutes, a 6-minute interview with Godard from 1965 complaining about ‘damned if I do, damned if I don’t’ criticisms (it also includes a very choice clip from the film), and a nice 29-minute (actually 25 minutes, with jazz filler at the end) audio-only interview with Godard in English from 1961.

Godard’s 1966 contemplation of the social lives of kids barely out of their teens, **Masculin Féminin**, has been released on Blu-ray by Criterion (UPC#7155152-58517, \$40). We reviewed Criterion’s DVD in Sep 08, and the DVD’s wonderful special features have all been carried over. However, the source material has gone through an upgrade in the interim, and so both the picture and the sound are substantially improved. The full screen black-and-white image is brighter and crisper, with clearer details and more realistic shadings (the DVD is much too dark in comparison). The monophonic sound is fantastic and switching back and forth between the two is almost like being in a Godard movie with his audio dropouts. The sound is particularly important because pop star Chantal Goya stars with Jean-Pierre Léaud (he picks her up in a café and—to the viewer, boorishly—enters into a relationship with her) and not only does she perform on camera, but her songs and similar songs infest the background. On the DVD, you don’t really pay attention to the music because the sound delivery is mediocre. On the Blu-ray, every audio component has strength, even when its volume is minimized. The 104-minute film is in French with optional English subtitles.

Both Léaud’s character and Goya’s character have friends—Marlène Jobert, Michel Debord and Catherine-Isabelle Duport co-star (apparently by happenstance, Brigitte Bardot also shows up in one sequence)—and the film is primarily about the development of their relationships, as a reflection upon the enlightened dating and mating habits of young people at the time. The film could also be seen as a sort of sly parody of the films of both Truffaut and Eric Rohmer. Viewed a half-century later, the cast is all frightfully young, but it is their immaturity that justifies the hopelessness of their characters’ impulsive actions. Their choices may be inelegant, but they are more realistic than what is shown in a normal film about young romance, and the film remains a delight because it preserves and celebrates its sense of youthful spirit even as it exposes the naïveté and selfishness at the core of that spirit, right down to the wonderful, vacuous pop songs.

The supplement includes two lovely interviews with Goya, one running 5 minutes from 1966 and one running 15 minutes from 2005; a 4-minute archival clip of Godard shooting a scene; a 16-minute interview with co-star Jean-Pierre Gorin from 2004; a 12-minute interview from 2005 with cinematographer Willy Kurant; a very good 25-minute appreciation of the film; and two trailers.

In the late Sixties, but then throughout the Seventies, Godard’s performers became mouthpieces more than they were characters. There are still some films from that period that we enjoy (we can never get enough of the critically reviled **Tout Va Bien**), but as challenging as his earlier films were for the boxoffice, the Seventies were lost to him almost entirely. It was only in the Eighties, when he began to embrace the concept of characters again, that his films achieved a renewed popular enthusiasm, at least among sophisticated filmgoers, and the movie that broke the ice in that regard was his 1980 **Every Man for Himself** (*Suave qui peut (la vie)*), a Janus Films Gaumont Criterion Blu-ray (UPC#715515136310, \$40). Even the **Godard Cinema** documentary singles out the film as representing the start of Godard’s artistic resurgence and Godard commonly refers to the feature as his, “second first film.”

The film is still challenging, exploring the emotional lives of several different and somewhat unlinked characters that require more than one run through to differentiate, and it contains graphic discussions of sex that flirt with pornography, augmented by teasing but less explicit actual nudity. But the film is about the characters, invoking politics only as an overriding metaphor for the exploitation of women, and in addition to stars Jacques Dutronc and Nathalie Baye, the film has the advantage of being Godard’s first collaboration with Isabelle Huppert, a partnership that spawned several remarkably popular features. Dutronc is a television director and Baye is his divorced wife. Running 88 minutes, the film intercuts the tensions between them as they use their daughter, played by Cécile Tanner, as a weapon, and Huppert’s character, a prostitute who is trying to find a nicer apartment so she can get away from living with her family. While the overall purpose of the film may seem obscure at first, the individual scenes, especially those involving Huppert, are readily accessible and engaging, and the film’s generally scathing depiction of men as essentially the necessary thorns in the sides of women gives the movie’s appeal an appropriate sense of universality.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.66:1. The colors are bright and when the source material is not manipulated—Godard uses video effects to distort or disrupt the flow of the images at times—the picture is very sharp and clear. The monophonic sound is quite strong and crisp, and the film is in French with optional English subtitles, accompanied by a trailer.

Godard’s fun 20-minute promo reel, *Scénario de “Suave qui peut (la vie)”*, made in 1979 to attract investors for the longer work, has been included. Also featured is a really good 26-minute look at Godard’s films in the Seventies (“The results are barely watchable as films, even if they remain unparalleled investigations of the language of cinema.”), with incisive explanations of what the films accomplished and how he was pulled back into narrative film. It also thoroughly deconstructs **Every Man for Himself**.

There are clips in **Godard Cinema** of Godard appearing on *The Dick Cavett Show*, and on the **Every Man for Himself** BD, both complete visits with Cavett from 1980, intended to publicize the film, are included, along with a very cute half-minute promo. Each episode runs 28 minutes and the two were shot back to back. Playing very much like today’s podcasts, the discussion between Godard and Cavett is not overly deep, but neither is it superficial as they talk about Godard’s working methods, slow motion, subtitling, film auteurs, Vanessa Redgrave’s politics and the dynamics of

space within film. Cavett points out, “I’m always surprised when I read the list of filmmakers that you grew up on or admired as a young man going to movies because their films are unlike your own. I may be wrong, but they seem that way.” Godard takes a long time before he admits, “I realize to see the right story I want to see I have to participate. I feel responsible of what I see. The best way to answer this responsibility is to go and make a movie, so I’m at most sure I will receive the right movie for me to see. If I don’t, I will be responsible for it because I made it.” A 17-minute Godard interview made in 1980 with Peter Wollen and Donald Ranvaud, also in English, is geared more closely to discussions about the filmmaking process, and has livelier camera work (“Most movies are made by blind people today.”).

Additionally, there is a 2010 interview with composer Gabriel Yared running 6 minutes and supplying a quick but comprehensive anecdote of how he came to do the film’s music; a 13-minute interview with producer Marin Karmitz from 2014 about pulling Godard back from funding purgatory and helping him get his mojo again (Karmitz played a clever trick upon critics who had initially disparaged the feature); a marvelous 2014 interview with Huppert running 11 minutes talking about the challenges of her role and how Godard wanted her line readings to absorb his Swiss accent; a terrific 2010 interview with Baye running 17 minutes reminiscing about the shoot, how he worked with her (he focused on technical matters), and what she gained from it (“No actor in the world could be bad in a Godard film. I’ve seen actors who aren’t always excellent in other films but with Godard they’re dazzling.”); and a great 1981 interview with cinematographers Renato Berta and William Lubtchansky running 20 minutes explaining how they split their duties on the set and still managed to get along with each other and Godard, and discussing the strategies behind specific shots (“He’d do without us if he could.”).

A real treat for Godard fans, ECM Cinema has released a hardcover book, **Jean-Luc Godard Four Short Films Anne-Marie Miéville** that also contains a DVD with the four shorts (UPC#602498731857, \$38). The menu has a ‘Play All’ option, and the films are in French with optional English and German subtitles, although the subtitling is often stingy, translating what one might term the ‘A’ dialog track but ignoring the ‘B’ and ‘C’ tracks or any text that appears on the image. All four shorts have a reasonably strong 5.1-channel Dolby Digital audio track with a basic dimensionality. The first two are in a squared full screen format and the final two are windowboxed in the same squared format, but without 16:9 enhancement, which will give the images a distorted stretching unless manually adjusted. As for the 117-page book, which is the size of a standard DVD case, it contains a very nice collection of small stills from each movie, with a commentary and essays on each film in French, German and English.

The first film is an impressive evocation of war in the Twentieth Century from 2000, *De l’origine du XXIe siècle*, which combines perspicuous footage of atrocities with clips from a couple dozen feature films from around the world (including **Breathless**, **The Nutty Professor** and **The Shining**) and other stray material. The film’s 15-minute running time works to its favor, presenting a hyper-charged burst of ideas, images and sounds that is over before it becomes tiresome. The images are clear although the quality of clips vary depending upon the source and how interested Godard is in giving them an obscure look. When the material is intended to be fresh, it is.

The centerpiece of the anthology is a 46-minute essay on art from 1999, *The Old Place*, which includes more film clips along with images of artistic works from cave paintings to living sculptures. Despite its intentions to explore and instruct, the film is undeniably art about art, and will provide fresh insights and ideas with every viewing. The newest images are still a bit soft, but colors are bright.

The next film, *Liberté et Patrie* from 2002, is a 21-minute rumination on an artist so obscure he does not even have a Wikipedia profile, Aimé Pache, although his works were featured in the Swiss Expo 2002. The film is also sort of a tribute to Switzerland in general. It mixes images of Switzerland and presumably the works of the artist with relevant references and has a sort of playful, good natured tone. The final work, *Je vous salue, Sarajevo* from 1993, is a 2-minute deconstruction of a specific photo from the military conflict in Bosnia at the time, featuring three armed men in fatigues and three bodies or civilians at their feet in an urban setting.

### Fetching clues

Glancing longingly but ever so quickly at a fire hydrant before getting into a cab, Dick Powell plays a private detective in the 1951 Universal ‘B’ feature, **You Never Can Tell**, who has been reincarnated from a murdered dog. The delightfully wacky film, released on Blu-ray by Universal and Kino Lorber Incorporated as a *KL Studio Classics* Blu-ray (UPC#73832926-6363, \$25), runs just 78 minutes and nobody on Earth could claim it is a masterpiece, but it is the sort of movie that should you come across it while channel surfing, your thumb (or whatever digit you use on your remote) would be stayed until it was over. Despite little touches like the hydrant glance and scratching briefly behind his ear, Powell would clearly rather be anywhere than in front of the camera. His heart is not in it the way, for example, that Donald O’Connor’s was in the Francis films, but he is a professional and he delivers his part with enough maturity to sell the movie’s absurd silliness. Peggy Dow is a secretary who was the dog’s guardian after her millionaire boss passed away and left his money to the dog, with Dow’s character being the next in line for the inheritance. She’s a sweet kid, but Charles Drake is a fortune hunter who weasels his way into her life, and it is no real mystery who has done the dog in. Powell’s character is sent from animal heaven (the film’s most striking sequence, a rather amazing solarized spectacle) to put things straight, accompanied by a former racehorse ‘filly,’ played by Joyce Holden, to aid in his endeavor. Directed by Lou Breslow, the film’s stupidity is self-evident, but if one accepts it at face value, there aren’t 78 other minutes that could be anywhere near as entertaining.

The squared full screen black-and-white picture has minor speckling and scratches throughout, but is otherwise sharp and in good shape, with well defined contrasts. The monophonic sound is okay, and there are optional English subtitles. Film historians Michael Schlesinger and Darlene Ramirez provide an enthusiastic commentary track, talking about the film’s effective creativity along with thoroughly going over the careers and lives of the crew, the cast and the dog.

### Male vulnerabilities

A drifter hooks up with a girl he once met in another city and she invites him to an apartment that she shares with three other women who are, apparently, assassinating the men who hit on them in the playful 1969 German feature, **Red Sun** (*Rote Sonne*), a Radiance Blu-ray (UPC#760137126553, \$30). Clearly influenced by Jean-Luc Godard (particularly **Weekend** and **Pierrot le Fou**), Rudolf Thome directed the funky 89-minute tale, which would have been a lot more fun if it were an Italian production but, like Godard's movies, does succeed in melding what the viewer actually sees with what the viewer imagines as the film progresses. The drifter, played by Marquard Böhm, is a dork, but the girls seem legitimately charmed by him and at least a couple of them drag their feet when it comes time to do him in. In the meantime, he witnesses everything else they are up to and really seems more interested in just having a place to crash than with having his way with them after they've lost interest in that aspect of his presence. The film's Seventies stylizations and the screen presences of the four actresses, Uschi Obermaier, Sylvia Kekulé, Gaby Go and Diana Körner, will be enough to satisfy fans of European exploitation features. While the film may seem a bit dry to casual viewers, it counts on engaging the viewer intellectually and assumes that everyone is in on the joke—men are way more vulnerable than they think they are—as it plays out its story. Even though it may seem innocuous on the first pass, it is eccentric enough that it can grow on one in multiple viewings.

The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.78:1. Like we said, it isn't an Italian production. The color designs are Seventies, yes, but German. That said, however, the image transfer is fresh and sharp. Fleshtones are accurate and hues are smooth. The monophonic sound is also accurately replicated, and while the rock music that plays in the background often sounds muted, that is actually part of the fun. The film is in German with optional English subtitles. There is a good 21-minute analysis of how the film fits into the dawn of the German New Wave and how it was influenced by the French New Wave ("What Thome and [screenwriter Max] Zihlmann are doing is in a way quoting the films of the [French] New Wave that had been quoting the films of Howard Hawks and Raoul Walsh, so it's a copy of a copy, and you see something of that in the aesthetics of *Rote Sonne*."), exploring its unusual choices of artistic emphasis, from its strangely constrained use of color to the matter-of-fact manner of the performances. An excellent 50-minute piece on German post-War cinema is included, with lots of great clips. Although they do not give any due to the wonderful murder mysteries and westerns that Germany produced in the Fifties and early Sixties, there is a comprehensive look at the German New Wave and its antecedents, as well as the political movements that shadowed the local filmmaking trends.

Thome is also interviewed for 58 minutes over scenes from the film, talking about the production and the film's meanings.

"Men don't understand that there's a whole other world outside this one."

"Did women and men react differently to your film?"

"They didn't, actually. My theory is that men and women can't be differentiated like that. Men and women don't differ on such a base level, but you can differentiate them in other ways, on a deeper level. This is a film made by a man and not by a woman. A woman wouldn't have made the film like this." (Indeed, what is seen today as backlash against inclusive attitudes might actually be interpreted as a male defense against the female assertiveness that began in the Sixties and Seventies.)

### Enter the ninja

The first three Japanese **Shinobi No Mono** films starring Raizo Ichikawa are being collected in a two-platter Blu-ray set by Radiance, **Shinobi Band of Assassins / Revenge / Resurrection** (UPC#760137153979, \$65). The films essentially defined what has become a worldwide popular trope today, the ninja fighter, who uses stealth and deception to achieve his goals. With a focus on the ninja tricks and action, however, the movies also, on another level, strive for historical accuracy, essentially placing Ichikawa's character, like Horatio Hornblower or Richard Sharpe, amid a time of great turnover and power struggles in his land, and then suggesting that his character had a hand in facilitating a number of recorded events. At the same time, the films have valid emotional narratives, so that everyone from Japan's historical leaders to Ichikawa's character are motivated at least in part by their hearts (in addition to superior fighting skills and an innovative, unique arsenal, one of the supreme ninja weapons is duplicitous emotional manipulation).

We reviewed the films on DVDs from Koch Releasing and Animeigo in Jan 08 and Jul 09 (in a subsequent installment, not included in the BD set, Ichikawa's character was different). The Blu-ray presentation is consistently smoother and sharper than the DVDs, and the monophonic sound is substantially stronger, with just a minor amount of background noise. The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 2.35:1 and, as with so many Japanese 'exploitation' films, the widescreen cinematography is superb, with carefully balanced image compositions and evocative lighting. The image lacks the intensity of the very best black-and-white transfers, but it has no significant flaws and accurately reflects the budgets of the individual films.

Although the tone of each film advances in a more nihilistic direction, the three movies essentially comprise a single work and, indeed, the endings of the first and second films (including an actual cliffhanger in the second, as Ichikawa's character is about to be boiled in oil) are repeated at the beginnings of the second and third films. Throughout all three, the action is terrific, including not just fight scenes but larger, elaborate battles, and the inventive 'ninja' weapons and activities are delightful. There is a decent amount of gore, particularly for the early Sixties.

In the opening feature, *Shinobi: Band of Assassins*, from 1962, Ichikawa's character is part of a remote ninja stronghold. Their leader, played

by Itô Yunosuke (the elderly hero in **Ikiru**), wants him to assassinate a general, played by Tomisaburo Wakayama of **Bounty Hunter** (Apr 24), who is busy consolidating his hold over the country. There is a wonderful plot twist early on involving a second group of ninjas in another fortress, and as much as the film is about Ichikawa's hero character, it is also about these other leaders and their elaborate schemes. Ostensibly, the film has a 'happy' ending, and the only vague shortcoming to the 104-minute film is that the hero ultimately has no part in the primary changes that occur, but the fact that he is able to get into the middle of things and then out again without harm is a major accomplishment.

The happy ending does not last long. *Shinobi 2: Revenge* from 1963 (appearing on the first platter with the previous film), advances in time as Ichikawa's character once again becomes enmeshed in an effort to take down Wakayama's character, after which he must cope with the other factions vying for power while trying to hold onto his dream of a normal life. Although the film does not have the shenanigans of Yunosuke's character that made the first film so engaging, it effectively widens the scope of the tale to integrate Ichikawa's character with Japanese historical events while effectively sustaining the entertainment and action for its 93-minute running time. Wrapping things up while at the same time suggesting that the power struggles never end, the 1963 *Shinobi 3: Resurrection*, which runs 86 minutes, has Ichikawa's character specifically planting doubts and encouraging betrayals among the family that has consolidated power, with the sole purpose of defiling the leaders who have crushed his happiness.

On the first platter, accompanying the first two films, there is a 14-minute appreciation of director Satsuo Yamamoto, who directed both films, and the undertone of political dissent that wafts through them. He refused to do the third film because in his concept, the hero didn't make it past the cliffhanger at the end of the second film. The third film was directed by Kazuo Mori. The second platter comes with trailers for all three movies, a fascinating 14-minute profile of Ichikawa ("Many of Raizo's characters are reflections of his ailments. You can sense it when you watch his performances."), and a dry but informative 18-minute overview of Japanese ninja movies.

### Money changes everything

The title gives it away, but the less said about the story details of the wonderful 1955 Universal adventure thriller, **The Looters**, the better. Rory Calhoun stars as a recluse living in the Rocky Mountains whose army buddy, played by Ray Danton, comes for a visit. And then something else happens. Directed by Abner Biberman and running 87 minutes, the film, released on Blu-ray by Universal and Kino Lorber Incorporated as a *KL Studio Classics* title (UPC#738329266370, \$25), has a reasonably tight logic to the unfolding of its plot and is an ideally entertaining mixture of psychological conflict and elemental challenges. Julie Adams, delivering an exceptionally well-sculpted performance, co-stars, with Thomas Gomez, Frank Faylen and John Stephenson.

The black-and-white picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. The image is a little soft, but is otherwise in excellent shape with no significant markings or shortcomings. The monophonic sound is okay, and there are optional English subtitles. Fifties film expert Toby Roan provides a passable commentary track, going over the careers of the cast and the crew, talking about the film's production history and background, and discussing the history of its release, including a story about an Army unit that had received a copy of the film, set everything up for a screening, and then discovered that the film cans were empty. "Somebody had looted **The Looters**."

### Dud

The nadir of Diane Keaton's career was her performance in **The Godfather, Part II**. It was painful to watch the first time, and her flat, forced dialog readings have remained painful ever since. She is genuinely talented in comedy, but after she won her Oscar, Hollywood tried experimenting with putting her in serious dramas, because that is what Hollywood does. She was better than she was in **Godfather, Part II**, but it was still like somebody was trying to make her wear clothing that didn't suit her. George Roy Hill was also much better at making movies that had comical elements in them than making straight, serious dramas, and so, when the two signed on to do an adaptation of a John le Carré bestseller, **The Little Drummer Girl**, they both worked their utmost to get past these shortcomings. But the high quality of the planning, as against the poor quality of the bomb, turned the suspicion into certainty. The 1984 film just did not work all that well. Parts of it are terrific—Klaus Kinski is so wonderful as the head of the Israeli intelligence operation putting the whole plan in motion that you wish there had been a whole series of shows with him—but as Hill attempts to squeeze Le Carré's novel into a 130-minute feature, the transitions that Keaton's character goes through are unpersuasive. There are moments of suspense, sure, and some fantastic locations in both Europe and the Middle East, but it wasn't enough to succeed. As a romance, pitting Hollywood against the realities of Le Carré's mindset, it was a pffft. Warner Bros. has released the film as a *WB Warner Archive Collection* Blu-ray (UPC#840418303412, \$22) just as the perennial conflict between Israel and the Palestinians has once again ignited, and into the passions of the supporters for one side or the other, but particularly the other, the film is pretty much gasoline for the fire. There is nothing wrong with that, as the film, like Le Carré's writing, is intended to inflame passions and make people think things through. Keaton's character is an actress, working in London, who is hired and then manipulated by the Israelis into helping them entrap a Palestinian terrorist played by Sami Frey. Yorgo Voyagis is the handler who starts to fall in love with her. Keaton's character is supposed to be something of a cipher or superficial—all surface and nothing substantial inside. She plays each scene as well as she can, but as the film bangs its drumsticks from one highlight of the novel to the next, a melody never forms.



The picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1. The color transfer is definitely fresh, but the picture is consistently soft, conveying a blandness that undercuts the impact of the locations and sets. Although there is an appealing Dave Grusin musical score that readily draws inspiration from the various locales, the monophonic sound is steadfastly centered and uninteresting. There are optional English subtitles and a trailer.

### 4K Ladies

Tinto Brass's 1992 hard-softcore erotic tale, *All Ladies Do It* (it is a shame the film's original Italian title was not kept, although it would certainly cause misguided Mozart fans a bit of a surprise—but apparently not Mozart himself, who would surely have been game—*Così Fan Tutte*), has been released as a *4K Ultra HD + Blu-ray* by Cult Epics (UPC#88119002-1491, \$50). We reviewed the Cult Epics DVD in Apr 02. While there are prosthetic hardcore shots in the film, they are fleeting, and in fact what sets the movie apart from sheer pornography is that all of the erotic sequences pass by speedily. The 97-minute film is much more about what is going to happen and what has happened than it is about what is happening. Claudia Koll stars as a clerk in an upscale lingerie store who loves her husband very, very much and cannot understand why he starts pouting when she plays around with other men. Go figure.

Although it was shot mostly on soundstages, the film is set in Rome and Venice and part of its appeal, along with the attractiveness of the cast, is the glossy production designs, skimpy but chic costumes, and classy cinematography. While the image, letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1, is not without grain, especially in darker sequences, the grain gives the film a textured presence. To this end, the standard Blu-ray and the 4K presentation are crisper than the DVD (minor speckling has also been removed, and the colors are brighter), and the 4K is noticeably sharper than the BD. Since the film is basically trying to gussy up its limited budget every way it can, the richer the delivery the less cheap the endeavor feels as a whole, and that is what the 4K presentation enables. It comes the closest to conveying the film's luxuries. Pino Donaggio's don't-let-the-Eighties-disappear musical score is presented in stereo and again, while the DVD sounded nice, the BD delivers the music more forcefully, and the 4K rendition seems to be even a touch more incisive. The film defaults to an English language track for those who don't want to have to watch the optional English subtitles when so much else is going on, but even that audio track is a little bit blander than the Italian track, although the lip movements still don't match the dialog at times. The DVD was in English only, and was less explicit, being 9 minutes shorter.

The standard BD platter has a small collection of photos in still frame, 10 minutes of unsubtitled 'outtakes' that include material now incorporated in the film, and a 15-minute interview with Brass from 2001 about the film and his cast (he says he chooses actresses sometimes by tossing money on the ground and then watching their behinds as they pick it up). Both platters have a trailer and a decent commentary track by Italian film experts Troy Howarth and Eugenio Ercolani. They talk about Brass's entire career, go over Koll's career as well, speak about the other participants and discuss the indelible effect the film had on Italian cinema and society.

### DVD News

**CRITERION CORNER:** Three different versions of Sam Peckinpah's *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, including one that has never been released on home video before, will be featured in the Criterion Collection 4K Blu-ray release, along with a commentary with Paul Seydor, Robert Spottiswoode, and Michael Sragow; *Dylan in Durango*, an interview with author Clinton Heylin about the film's soundtrack; *Passion & Poetry: Peckinpah's Last Western*, a program about the making of the film; and an interview with James Coburn. The 4K presentation of Jean-Pierre Melville's *Le samouraï* will include interviews with Rui Nogueira, editor of *Melville on Melville*, and Ginette Vincendeau, author of *Jean-Pierre Melville: An American in Paris*; interviews with Melville, Alain Delon, François Périer, Nathalie Delon, and Cathy Rosier; and *Melville-Delon: D'honneur et de nuit* (2011), a short documentary exploring the friendship between the director and the actor and their iconic collaboration on *Le samouraï*. Wim Wenders's *Perfect Days* will be in 4K and will feature an interview with Wenders; an interview with actor Koji Yakusho; *Some Body Comes into the Light* (2023), a short by Wenders, featuring a new introduction by the director; and an interview with producer Koji Yanai, founder of the Tokyo Toilet project. Wender's 3D film, *Anselm*, is also being released as a separate Blu-ray. Glauber Rocha's *Black God, White Devil* will be accompanied by a commentary by restoration producer Lino Meireles; an interview with film scholar Richard Peña; *Glauber the Movie, Labyrinth of Brazil* (2003), a documentary on director Glauber Rocha; *Cinema Novo* (2016), a documentary on the Brazilian film movement; and *Memória do cangaço* (1964), a short documentary on the origins of cangaço, a form of social banditry in northeastern Brazil. Paul Brickman's *Risky Business* will get 4K treatment and will include a commentary for the original theatrical release featuring Brickman, producer Jon Avnet, and Tom Cruise; interviews with Avnet and casting director Nancy Klopfer; a conversation between editor Richard Chew and film historian Bobbie O'Steen; *The Dream Is Always the Same: The Story of Risky Business*, a program featuring interviews with Brickman, Avnet, cast members, and others; and screen tests with Cruise and Rebecca De Mornay. Another 4K release, Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine*, will come with a conversation between Chinese-cultural-studies scholar Michael Berry and

producer Janet Yang; a documentary from 2003 on the making of the film; and an interview from 1993 with director Chen Kaige conducted by journalist Charlie Rose.

**CLOSED OUT OF TOWN:** *Werewolf Women*, *Hail Caesar*, *Broadway*, *Payback*, *The Curse of Willow Song* have been removed from our *Coming Attractions* listing.

**NEW IN BLU:** The following titles were recently issued on Blu-ray—Cool As Hell, Monster Matchup V.1 Monster Matchup V.2 Monster Matchup V.3 Monster Matchup V.4 Monster Matchup V.5 Monster Matchup V.6 Monster Matchup V.7 Monster Matchup V.8 Monster Matchup V.9 Monster Matchup V.10 (Acid Bath); The Last Slumber (AGFA); V/H/S Triple Feature (AMD); The Absence of Milk in the Mouths of the Lost (Art); The Procurator (Bayview); Andor Season 1, The Falcon and the Winter Snowman Season 1, Moon Knight Season 1, Obi-Wan Kenobi Complete Series (Buena Vista); Elegido Por El Amor, La Busqueda de Fe, Los Turistas Una Temporada en el Infierno, My Life with The Living Dead (Burning Bulb); Animation Night in Canada V.1 (Canadian); Death Squad, Dr. Jekyll and the Werewolf, Dr. Terror's House of Horrors, In Hell Productions The Films of Vince Roth and Mick Nards, Orozco El Embalsamador, Singapore Sling, Snuff 102, Special Silencers, Specters & Maya, Story of a Junkie (CAV); Affliction, Winnie the Pooh Blood and Honey (Cinedigm); Trenque Lauquen (Cinema Guild); Red Rock West (Cinematographe); Meet John Doe (Classicflix); Dogfight, I Am Cuba, La Haine, Werckmeister Harmonies (Criterion); Operation Skybolt (Dark Force); World War III (Deaf Crocodile); Which Brings Me To You (Decal); Time of Moulting (Dekalog); FIA Formula One World Championship 2023 The Official Review, TT Isle of Man Tourist Trophy 2023 Official Review (Duke); United States of Insanity (ETR); Jobe'z World (Factory 25); Against the Storm (Flicker Alley); The Oath (Freestyle); Almee The Visitor, Seedpeople (Full Moon); Deep in the Heart (Fun City); Deep Web (Giant); Above the Shadows, Aloha Surf Hotel, The Alpines, The Arbors, Armstrong, As of Yet, A\*\*holes A Theory, Ayar, Balloon Man, Bermuda Island, Bloody Summer Camp, Building a Bridge, Butterfly Kisses, Camp Blood X, Christmas Collision, The Christmas Dance, Dave Made a Maze, Dave Not Coming Back, Do Not Reply, Donna, Easter Bloody Easter, Every Day in Kaimuki, Exploited, Exposure 36, The Extinction of Fireflies, Home, Faith Based, Fat, Finding Kendrick Johnson, Fioretta, Firstness, Fly Like a Girl, 40 The Temptation of Christ, Gaslight, God's Waiting Room, Guilty Rebel, Hustle Down, I Met a Girl, I Used to Go Here, I'll Show You Mine, I'm Not Here, Impulse, An Intrusion, It's Quieter in the Twilight, Joy Ride, Jurassic Punk, Killing Me Softly with His Songs, Lancaster, Last Man Standing, Last Night in Rozzie, The Legend of Baron T'oa, London Unplugged, Lone Wolf, The Mandela Effect, Manson Brothers Midnight Zombie Massacre, The Mayberry Effect, Miss Angela, Mister Sleep, Night of the Tommyknockers, The Night Watchmen, One of These Days, The Other Fellow, Party with Me, The Reaper Man, Repeat, Road to Perth, Score, The Score, Ski Bum The Warren Miller Story, Some of Our Stallions, Sound of Violence, Spiked, The Star City Murders, Surviving Supercon, T11 Incomplete, Tethered, They Them Us, 350 Days, Til Death Do Us Part, Two for Joy, Where Are You, Wild Beauty Mustang Spirit of the West (Gravitas); Father of Nations (House Lights); Wake Up (Hotline); Bluebeard, Four Daughters, Household Saints, The Invisible Fight, The Looters, Mad Props, The Minus Man, Nostalgia, Road to Ruin, Starting Over, True Love, You Never Can Tell (Kino); Ordinary Angels (Lionsgate); The Promised Land (Magnolia); The Blind (Mill Creek); Hansel and Gretel, It's a Wonderful Knife, The Roundup No Way Out, Scalper, Stigmata (MPI); Fallen Leaves, Lars Von Trier's The Kingdom Trilogy (Mubi); Signature Move (Music Box); The Abandoned, Basket Case, Black Mask, The Cat and the Canary, The Church, Conan the Barbarian, Conan the Destroyer, Goodbye Uncle Tom, Graphic Sexual Horror, Hot Spur, Lola, Mean Guns, Messiah of Evil, Misunderstood, Police Story III Super Cop, The Scarface Mob, The Scavengers, The Sect, The Shape of the Night, The Tin Star, Tormented (MVD); Gods of Mexico, Joyland, Love Life (Oscilloscope); Lawman Bass Reeves, Mean Girls, Star Trek Lower Decks Season 4, Tom Clancy's Jack Ryan The Final Season, Tom Clancy's Jack Ryan Complete Series (Paramount); The Demoniacs, The Nude Vampire (Powerhouse); Karate Contra Mafia (Pulse); The Artistry of A. Dean Irby (Rainbow); Another Day to Live Through, Between Waves, Beyond the Wasteland, A Christmas Wish, Deep Hatred, Deinfluencer, London Gangsters, On the Line, Taped-Up Memories (Rising Sun); Taxi (Samuel Goldwyn); Severe (Saturn's Core); City of Hope, Madame Web, The Peasants, You'll Never Get Rich (Sony); Camp Blood X, Revenge of the Empire of the Apes, Strange Things Happen at the Weird House, Things 5 Strange Monsters, Things 666 (Sterling); Imperfect Spies, Remnants, Violet (Syndicado); Roadkill, Walden (Uncork'd); Accidentally Preserved V.5 (Undercrank); Drive-Away Dolls, Half Baked Totally High, Jeepers Creepers Reborn, The Last Kingdom Seven Kings Must Die, Lisa Frankenstein, Night Swim, Robodoc The Creation of Robocop, (Universal); Another Body (Utopia); The Beekeeper, Doom Patrol Season 4, Doom Patrol Complete Series, Eight Men Out, Inside Man Year One, Justice League Crisis on Infinite Earths Part 2, Pressure Point, Rick and Morty Season 7 (Warner); Baby Assassins 2, Monolith, Monster (Well Go); Huesera (XYZ); Rebel (Yellow Veil); I Want to Believe 3 Aliens among Us (Zapruderfilm)

**NEW IN 4K:** The following titles were recently issued in 4K format—Andor Season 1, Moon Knight Season 1, Obi-Wan Kenobi Complete Series (Buena Vista); The Falcon and the Winter Soldier Season 1, Rolling Thunder (Cinedigm); Terrifier 2 (Coven); I Am Cuba, La Haine, Picnic at Hanging Rock, Werckmeister Harmonies (Criterion); Prisoners of the Ghostland (Image); Nostalgia (Kino); The Roundup No Way Out (MPI); All Ladies Do It, Basket Case, The Church, Conan the Barbarian, Conan the Destroyer, Goodbye Uncle Tom, The Sect (MVD); King Kong, Major League, Mean Girls, Mean Girls, Tom Clancy's Jack Ryan The Final Season, Tom Clancy's Jack Ryan Complete Series (Paramount); The Demoniacs, The Nude Vampire (Powerhouse); Madame Web, Steel Magnolias (Sony); The Beekeeper, The Departed, Justice League Crisis on Infinite Earths Part 2, Ocean's Trilogy (Warner)

