



DVDs: Oscar Hopefuls, Zombies On A Train, Classic Cary Grant and A Great Yarn

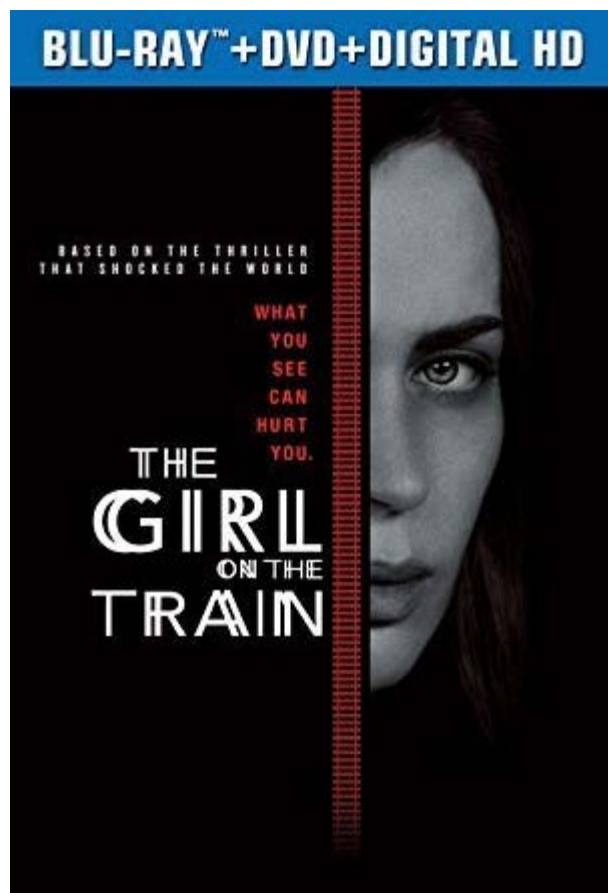


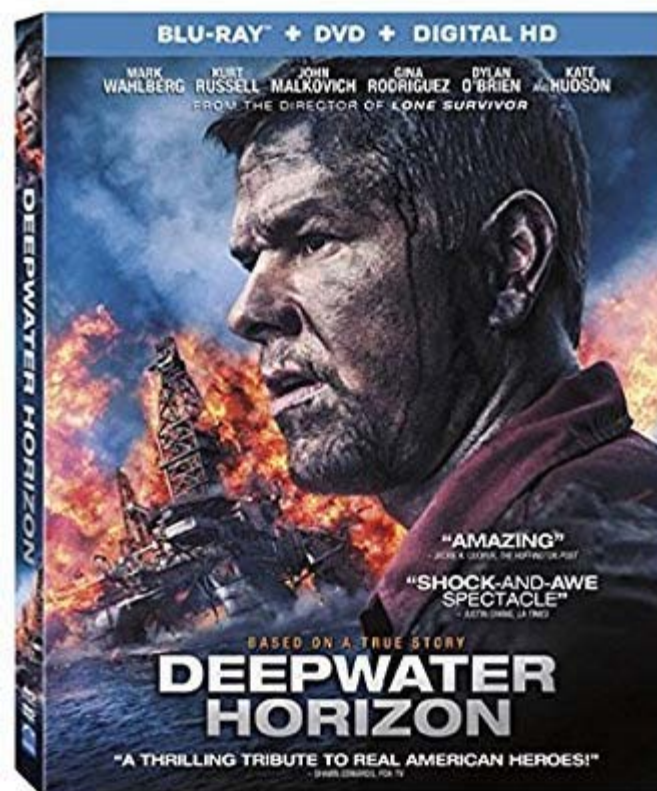
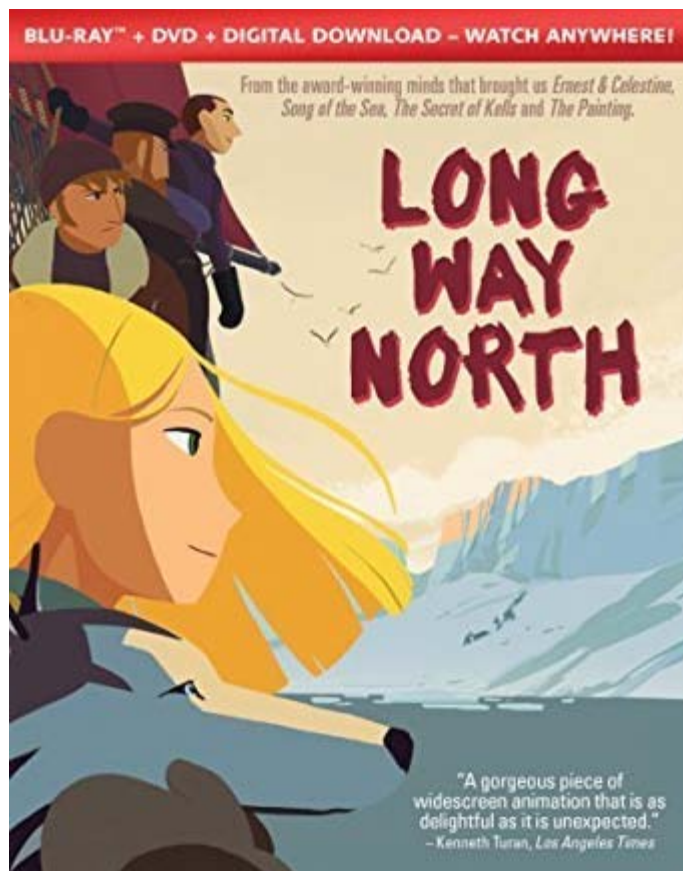
Michael Giltz, ContributorBookFilter creator

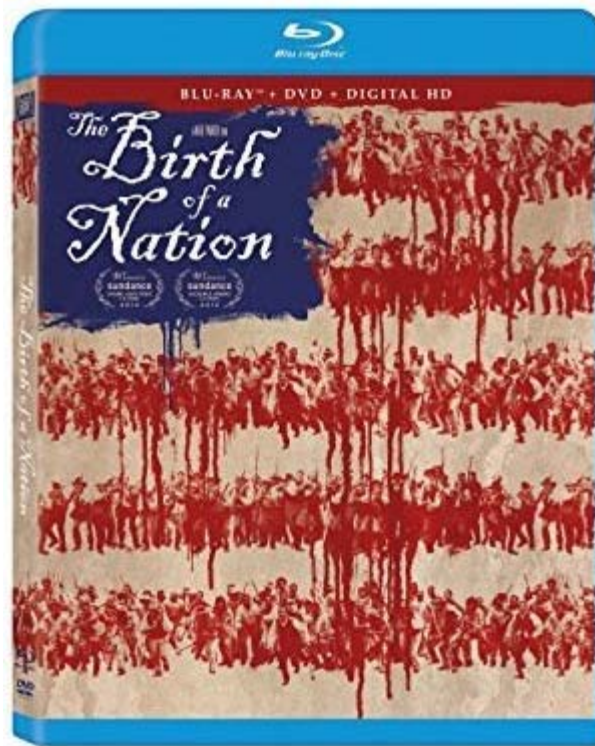
DVDs: Oscar Hopefuls, Zombies On A Train, Classic Cary Grant and A Great Yarn

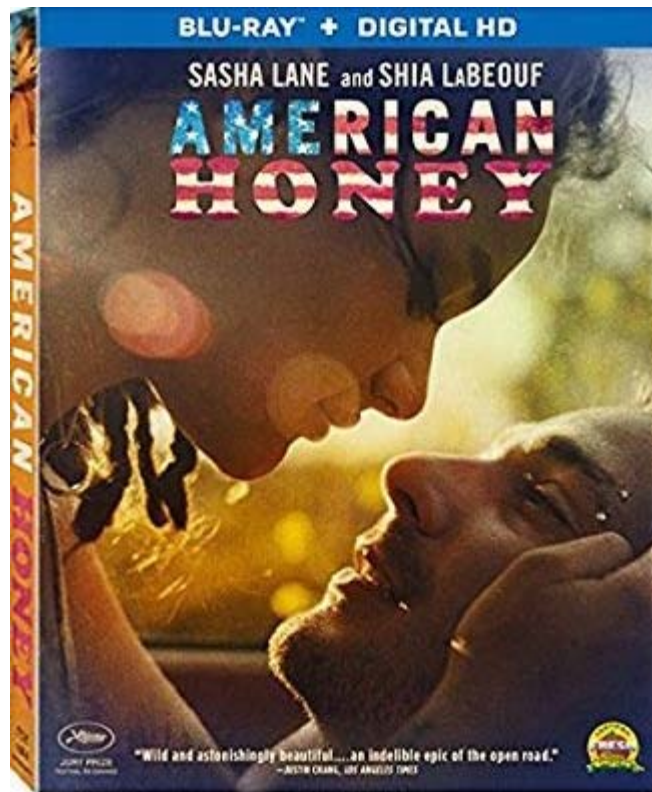
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Do you know what members of the Academy Of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences have been doing for the past few weeks? Catching up on a bunch of Oscar hopefuls via BluRay, DVD and streaming. Well, now it's our turn. The Oscar noms come out next week but that shouldn't keep us from starting now on the pile of movies that should be (but won't) or maybe shouldn't be (but will) get one step closer to a gold statue on January 24. Plus a pile of TV, documentaries that range from scary to inspiring, the glories of the Criterion Collection...and zombies on a train. You do want to see zombies on a train, don't you? Admit it.









THE GIRL ON THE TRAIN (\$34.99 BluRay; Universal Studios Home Entertainment)

LONG WAY NORTH (\$22.97 BluRay; Shout! Factory)

DEEPWATER HORIZON (\$39.99 BluRay; Lionsgate)

THE BIRTH OF A NATION (\$39.99 BluRay; 20th Century Fox)

THE DRESSMAKER (\$34.99 BluRay; Broadgreen)

AMERICAN HONEY (\$24.99 BluRay; Lionsgate)

Here are a clutch of films that expected to be, will be or should be nominated for Oscars. *The Girl On The Train* hoped to be a blockbuster thriller, but there was every reason to imagine that if they caught lightning in a bottle that star Emily Blunt would be nominated for Best Actress (at the very least). Well, the film came and went (it turns out what might have worked on the page — the untrustworthy narrator and so on — is a lot trickier to pull off on film). But everyone agrees if there's any reason to see the movie, it's Blunt.

I philosophically oppose a ghetto for animated films (and documentaries and international films). True, any and all of these categories can produce a film that **MIGHT** be nominated for Best Picture but they virtually never do. *OJ: Made In America* deserves to win Best Documentary and Best Picture, as far as I'm concerned. *Zootopia* will win Best Animated Film (truly) but it also deserves to be nominated for Best Picture. (*Toy Story I* or *II* or *III* should have been nominated and won Best Picture years ago.) But there's

one advantage to the ghetto: the animators have increasingly ambitious taste. They keep singling out worthy small films and if it's nominated in that category and you've never heard of it, you really should check it out. That goes for *My Life As A Zucchini* (the voters love it!) and *Long Way North*, a beautifully animated treat about a young Russian noblewoman in the 1800s who runs away from home to track down her grandfather who has disappeared in the Arctic.

Mark Wahlberg and director Peter Berg are developing an impressive body of work together and this year proved especially fruitful. (I'm a big fan of Berg, by the way.) *Patriots Day* — about the Boston bombing and how people came together to track down the perpetrators — is the Oscar hopeful, though perhaps a long shot. Even less likely for movie treatment was their survival pic *Deepwater Horizon*, about one of the worst man-made disasters in US history. A taut 97 minutes long, it's a riveting look at people under a sudden life or death situation when an off-shore oil rig becomes a death trap. Not since *Das Boot* has an audio track been so unnerving and impressive. I don't say this to bring him down to earth, but Mark Wahlberg began as rapper Marky Mark known for an impressive body and a willingness to drop his pants. Never write ANYONE off, people.

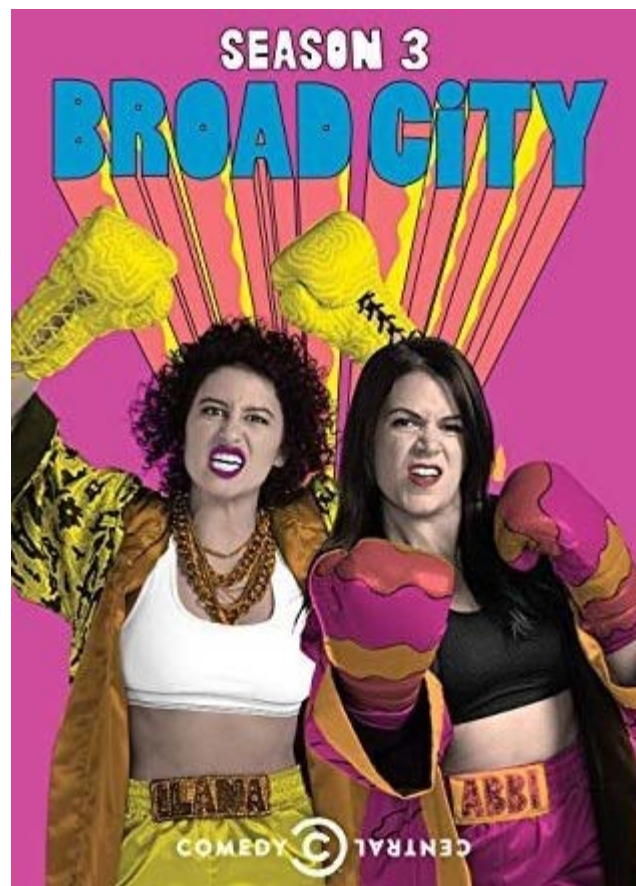
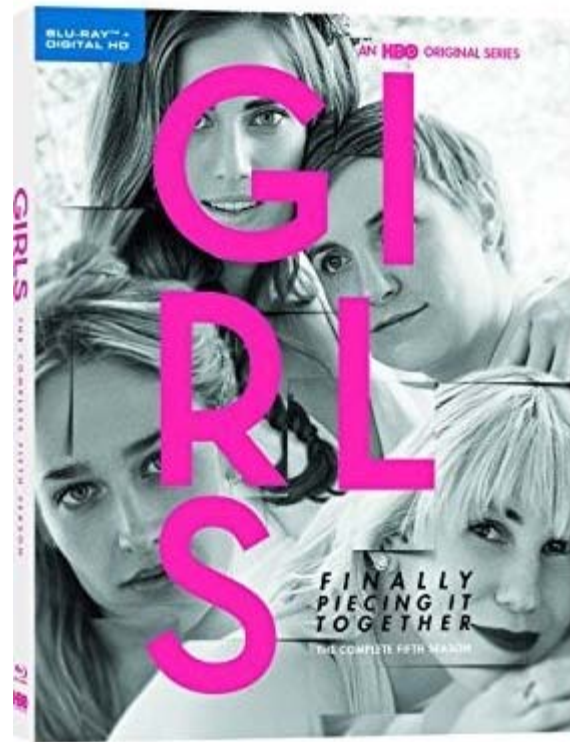
Nate Parker's debut *The Birth Of A Nation* was practically handed the Best Picture Oscar back in January of 2016 when it debuted at Sundance. It's impressively bold in subject matter with some very strong acting. However, anyone not caught up in the hype noticed something peculiar very early on. Many of the critics who commended the film for its ambition and "importance" also had a string of caveats and while the movie won the top awards a surprising number of outlets that feast on Sundance not only didn't name *The Birth Of A Nation* as the best film they saw, they didn't include it at ALL among their favorites from the fest (or just way down the list in a perfunctory manner). Long before the ugly past history of Parker and his collaborator on the screenplay came to light, I predicted it wouldn't go the distance. Now that it's crashed at the box office and among critics and all chances of Oscar are probably limited to secondary categories (if that), one can perhaps approach the film and appreciate what is there, namely an excellent cast in various roles pouring their heart into a project that has flaws but is not without value.

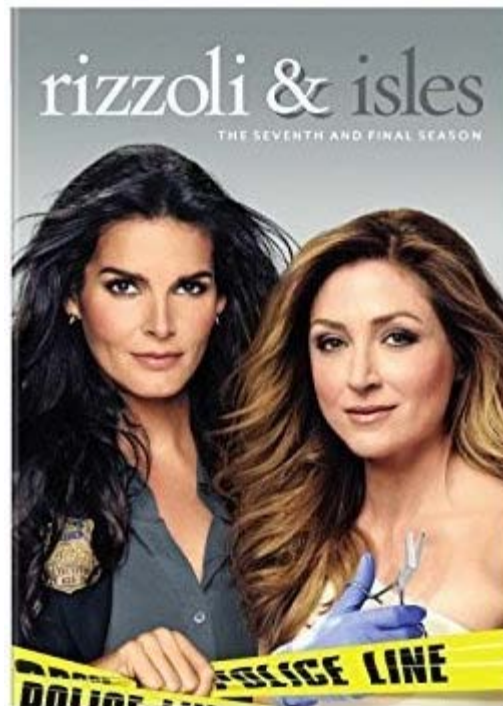
If the planets had aligned differently, *The Dressmaker* might be a contender in all sorts of ways, just like *The Birth Of A Nation* once reasonably assumed was its due. No scandal here: the planets just didn't align. Nonetheless, it's an entertaining period piece and Kate Winslet is an Oscar perennial with good reason. Usually they must struggle to find five worthy female performances among the movies they have bothered to see. (There are ALWAYS plenty more than five worthy female lead performances; they just aren't always in the movies that Oscar voters have seen). That's not the case this year but Winslet is memorable as a famous designer returning to her small town, hoping to piece together the reasons she doesn't quite fathom for being "exiled" so many years ago. And if a movie about a clothing designer isn't recognized by the Costume Guild, I'll eat my shirt. Mind you, my shirt was given to me by Lady Gaga and it's made of bacon, so that's actually not much of a boast and I'll probably eat it anyway.

Finally, there's *American Honey*, the critically acclaimed art house movie about young people wandering the heartland of America selling magazine subscriptions and generally having a grand old, wasted time. It's

the latest from British director Andrea Arnold, one of the major talents in world cinema today. This is most assuredly an art house film, despite the presence of Shia LaBeouf, which might bring in some mainstream folk expecting a dumb comedy. BluRay and streaming is a convenience and a blessing: who doesn't love the ability to watch all sorts of movies with great picture and sound in the privacy of their own home? Nonetheless, many many movies from broad comedies to action spectacles to intimate intense dramas and meandering oddities like this benefit greatly from being seen first in a movie theater. Seeing *Moonlight* or *Manchester By The Sea* at home just isn't the same as seeing it in a darkened theater with a group of other strangers. If you have adventurous taste, you really should watch the seemingly unfocused *American Honey* any way you can. And since that now means at home, go ahead — but try and keep yourself from stopping it every twenty minutes to do this or that. Sometimes being “trapped” in a movie is really the best way to experience it. And yes, a column devoted to BluRays and DVDs just urged you to see movies in a theater.







HOMELAND SEASON FIVE (\$49.99 BluRay; 20th Century Fox)

GIRLS SEASON FIVE (\$34.99 BluRay; HBO)

BROAD CITY SEASON THREE (\$26.98 DVD; Comedy Central)

RIZZOLI & ISLES SEVENTH AND FINAL SEASON (\$29.98 DVD; Warner Bros. Home Entertainment)

Speaking of catching up, isn't it great how you can catch up with episodes you missed or entire seasons you missed or even an entire series you missed? Kids these days — they don't know how lucky they've got it. *Homeland* has had so many quality ups and downs it's liable to give you whiplash. As a one and done miniseries it would have been a masterpiece. As a series, it has proven seriously flawed but — once you accept it's not going to be great — solid fun with very good acting, led by Claire Danes and Mandy Patinkin. Season five is by now the usual convoluted nonsense, but a good ride.

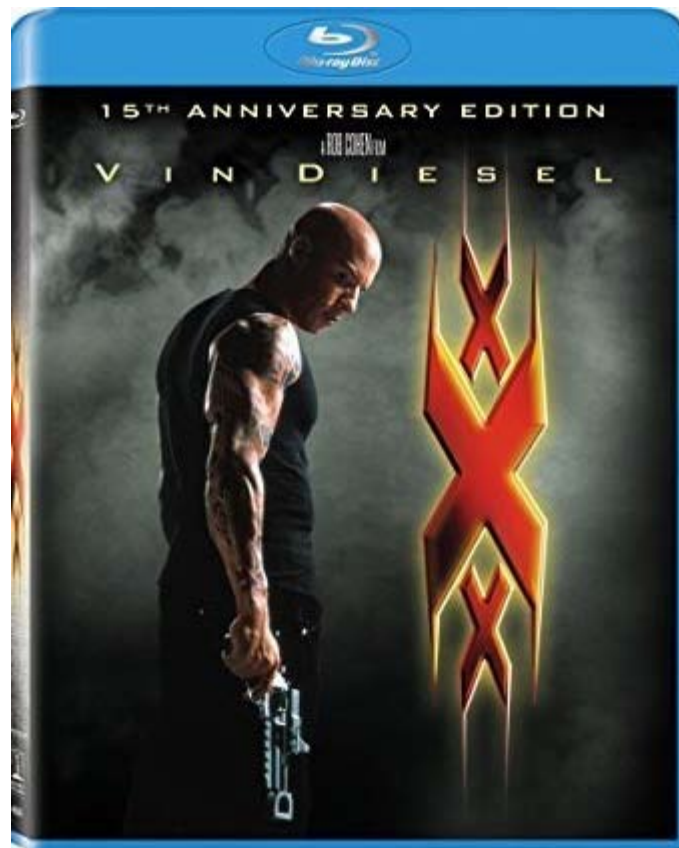
The final season of *Girls* happens in February, so what are you waiting for? Love it or hate it or trying to pretend you don't care only works for so long. From a self-absorbed season one to some seriously nervy moments throughout, the show at least remains water cooler worthy.

Broad City also has one more season to go (this time, it will be set in winter, not summer so the show won't be ready until August). From a near perfect storm of critical praise and success (by Comedy Central standards), the story of two women making it in New York has touched a nerve among cognoscenti. Creators Ilana Glazer and Abbi Jacobson perhaps achieved everything they had to say right off the bat, hence the audience fall off from the first to second to third season. But it's weird enough to warrant

attention right up to the end.

You'll find nothing weird or offbeat with the cop show *Rizzoli & Isles*, based on the best-selling series of mysteries by Tess Gerritsen. This is meat and potatoes procedural TV, despite some season long arcs and other fancy stuff. Angie Harmon and Sasha Alexander have terrific chemistry as a detective and a medical examiner who become very good friends while fighting crime. (But not very good friends, since the Sapphic undercurrent detected by everyone else was never explored by the clueless characters. Seven seasons and the sort of solid acting and supporting performances week in and week out by guest stars that keeps *Law & Order* and its ilk rolling. Don't despair that it's over — fans tuned in for the final season, happily, and you can look forward to a new novel about the duo by Gerritsen this August.





THE ACCOUNTANT (\$35.99 BluRay; Warner Bros. Home Entertainment)

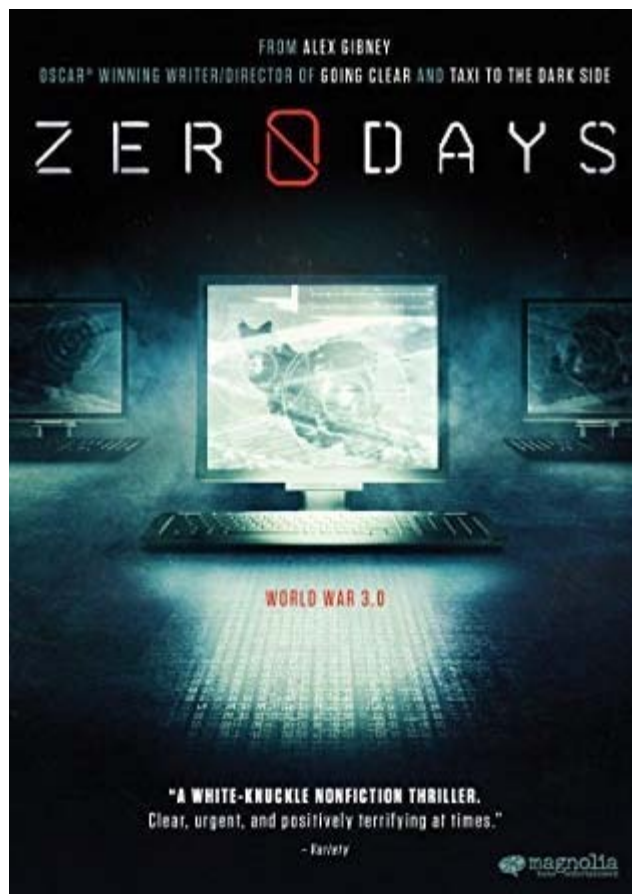
XXX 15TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION (\$19.99 BluRay; Sony Pictures Home Entertainment)

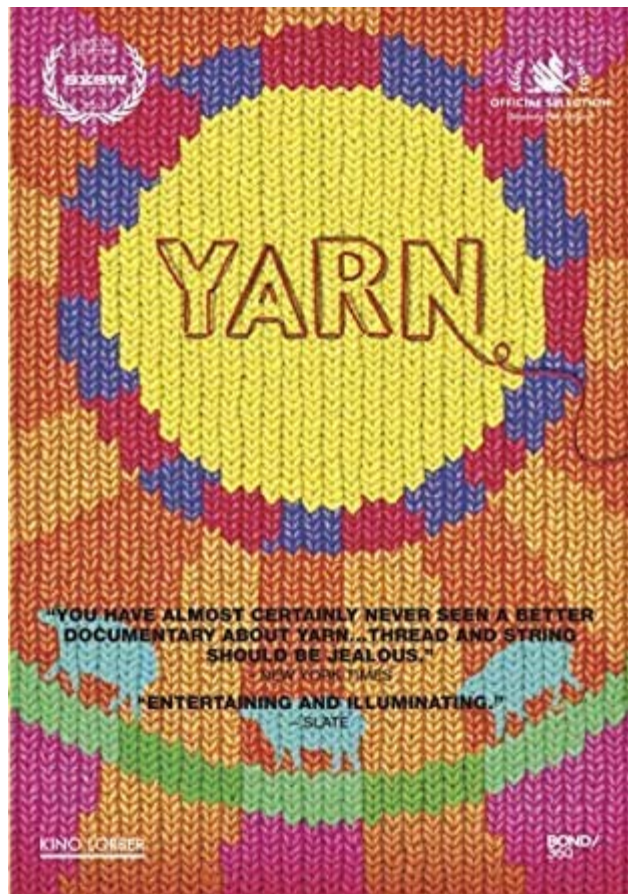
TRAIN TO BUSAN (\$29.98 BluRay; WellGoUSA)

It's been a rough holiday for actor and director Ben Affleck. After three critical and commercial hits in a row (not to mention an Oscar for Best Picture for *Argo*), he's stumbled for the first time with the period mystery *Live By Night*. That's no fun, but he can take comfort in the commercial success of *Batman V Superman* and the even better combination of commercial success and some critical appreciation for his b-movie thriller *The Accountant*, in which a nebbishy accountant on the autism spectrum proves a very unlikely enemy to organized crime. It's offbeat, silly and kind of fun. He'll be back to audit the hell out of you, bad guys! Count on it.

Then things get really silly with the anniversary edition of the thriller xXx starring Vin Diesel as Xander Cage, an extreme sports sort of dude who gets recruited to infiltrate the Russian mob, perform lots of lavish stunts and fire a lot of guns. Crazy over the top, it was hugely successful and surely the start of a James Bond type series the kids who watch the X Games could embrace. Then the first sequel tanked (they didn't want to pony up Diesel's new quote and hoped — not unreasonably — that Ice Cube could carry it on his own). So now Diesel and Cube are back together for more stunts in a new movie due out in a minute. Hey, the original is unexpected fun so maybe the third time will prove a charm again for Xander Cage.

But enough about all that. Zombies. Train. 'Nuff said? How about this? *Train To Busan* is the smartest Korean horror flick since *The Host* one decade ago. It's a huge box office hit in its home country, enjoyed great reviews and like the best genre movies of this sort, it is actually a lot cleverer and has a lot more on its mind than one might think at first glance. And you know, zombies. On a train. Go.





ZERO DAYS (\$26.98 DVD; Magnolia Home Entertainment)

DANCER (\$24.98 DVD; MPI Home Video)

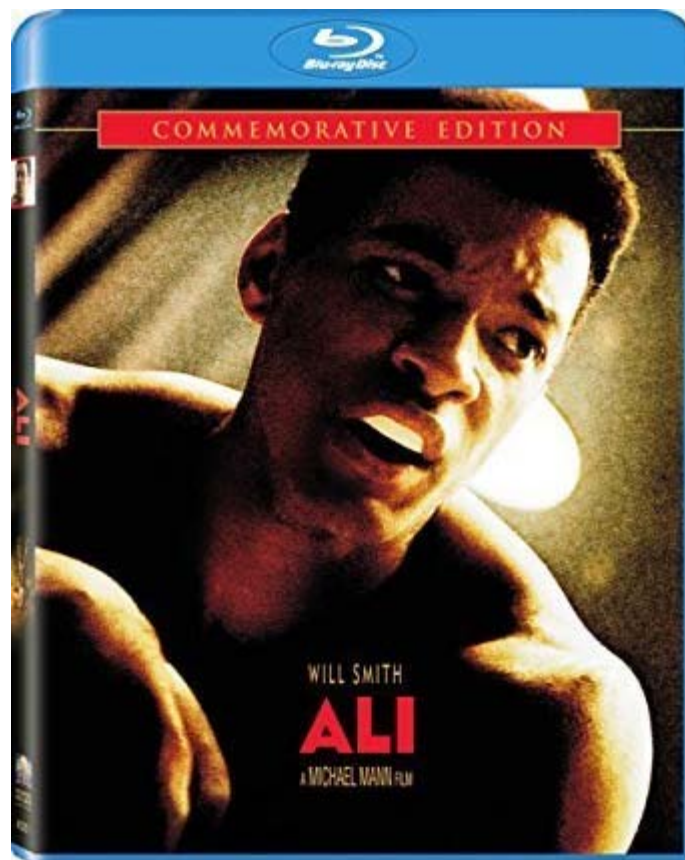
YARN (\$29.99 DVD; Kino Lorber)

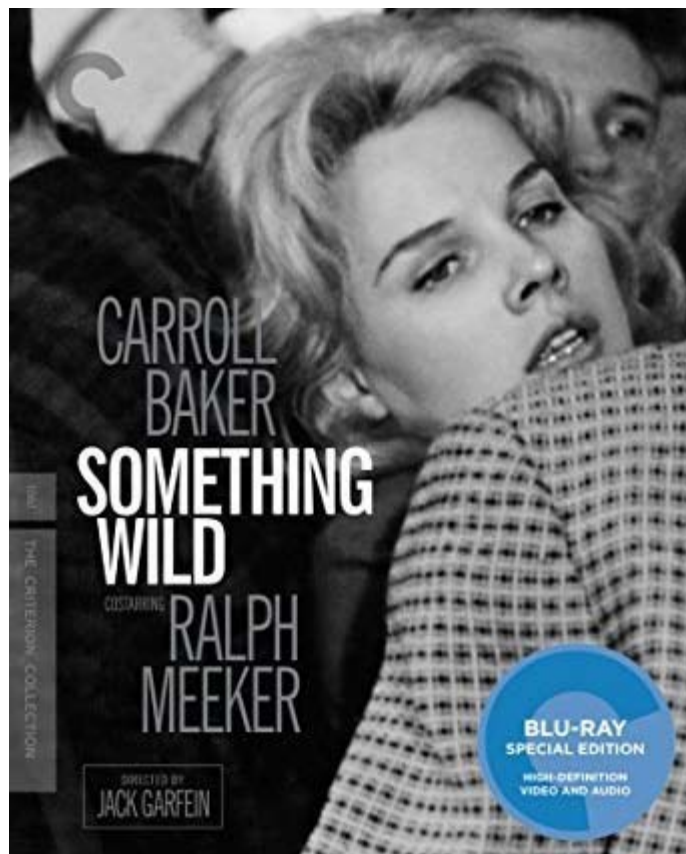
Muckraker Alex Gibney (that's a compliment by the way) has a doozy of a story in *Zero Days*. It starts off as an espionage thriller in which we learn some of the real details about how a cyber attack by the US and Israel managed to set back Iranian nuclear weapons development for many years. They developed malware that worked really, really well...and then it continued to work really really well, burrowing on into other computers and out into the world. The unintended consequences of computer viruses and malware created with the best of intentions is truly eye-opening, even for those who have considered the issue. For all but the most tech-oriented folk who are already a bit edgy about the dangers, this will be sobering information indeed.

The arts world isn't exactly known for crafting shrinking violets or humble artists. But whether you dub dancer Sergei Polunin a "bad boy" of ballet or a pain in the neck, a kid who grew up too fast or an artist pushing back against the cruel demands of the ballet world, there's no escaping the fact in the new documentary *Dancer* that the talent is real. Most who aren't dance fans will have seen or heard of this famed performer thanks to his appearance in the music video for the song "Take Me To Church." He's had a fascinating, divisive career at major dance companies all over the world and only time will tell if he can

balance an emotionally rewarding life with the martinet nature of dance at the highest levels. Director Steven Cantor is certainly empathetic and gives Polunin a chance to show the sacrifices all dancers make.

I just can't compete with the review written by Neil Genzlinger for the New York Times who said rather drolly, "You have almost certainly never seen a better documentary than *Yarn*. It isn't perfect — it's a little too airy and artsy in spots — but still, thread and string should be jealous." If there's a Hall of Fame for movie blurbs, that deserves to be in there. No wonder they put a shorter version of the quote on the cover of the DVD. Like so many documentaries, the subject is what keeps you watching, rather than any technical or formal accomplishments of the film. Instead of a broader survey of yarn or how it's made or the history of the craft, this focuses on artists who work in yarn and push the boundaries. Once you accept the film for what it is (a rather narrow slice of this world, instead of a broad survey), you can enjoy it more.





ALI COMMEMORATIVE EDITION (\$19.99 BluRay; Sony Pictures Home Entertainment)

HIS GIRL FRIDAY (\$49.95 BluRay; Criterion Collection)

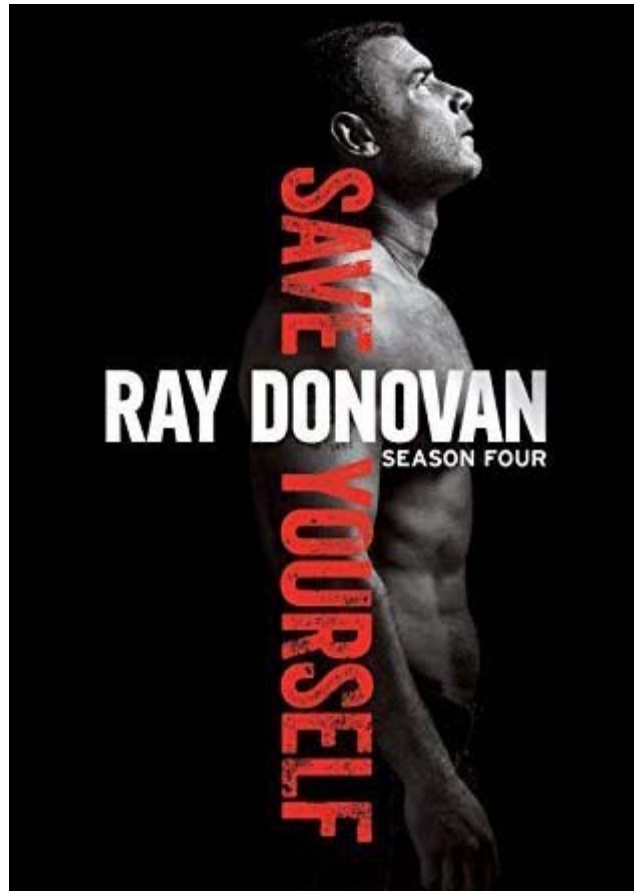
SOMETHING WILD (\$39.95 BluRay; Criterion Collection)

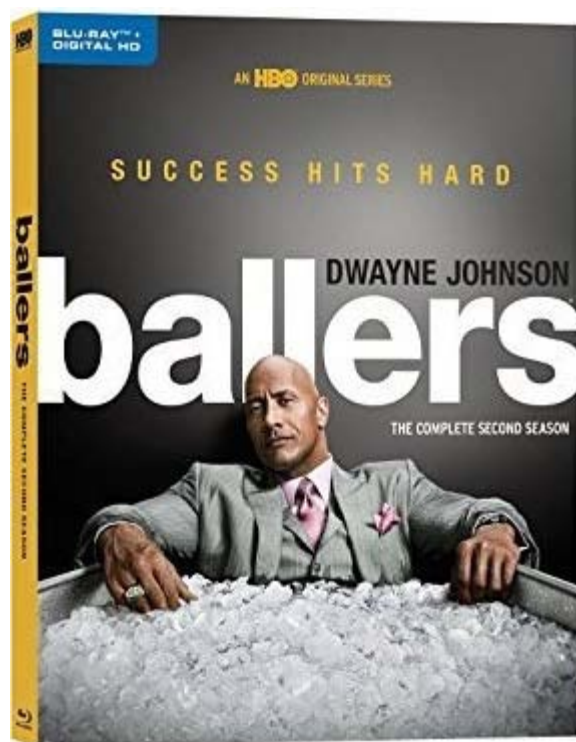
Unlike playwrights and sometimes novelists and certainly poets, I think it's fair to say that unless the studio interfered with your vision that having a director revisit their films and offer up new edits just because they feel they could do a better job now that time has passed is a practice viewed with a little suspicion by many critics. It just wasn't done in the past so unless you had a story to tell — they reshot the ending against the director's wishes! — well, why were you fiddling with the movie you made? It's done; move on! Of course it never happened much in the past because studios controlled movies for the most part (not directors) so they couldn't fiddle and even if they had clout, there wasn't really money to be made by doing a new edit of an old movie, so why bother as far as the studio was concerned? What's worse, when the home entertainment market and DVDs/BluRays and the like proved there was a lot of money to be made, the shelves were flooded with "director's cuts" that were really lazy new versions (often done without the director's input) that slapped in some footage from the cutting room floor. Now, finally, the practice has gained some respectability and the sell-through market has cooled down enough so that in most cases the new edits of movies are only happening because the director wants them to happen and has an actual vision. Michael Mann is a great example of that, offering up new cuts of *Last Of The Mohicans* for example and multiple cuts of his bio-pic *Ali*. Here he goes again, reframing the tale with a wider social context, emphasizing new beats towards the finale and delivering a film he believes the audience is more prepared to understand and accept than it was when the film first came out. It's easy to imagine film programs devoting study to how the various versions Mann has created differ from one another and how relatively subtle and major changes can impact what a film means to its viewers.

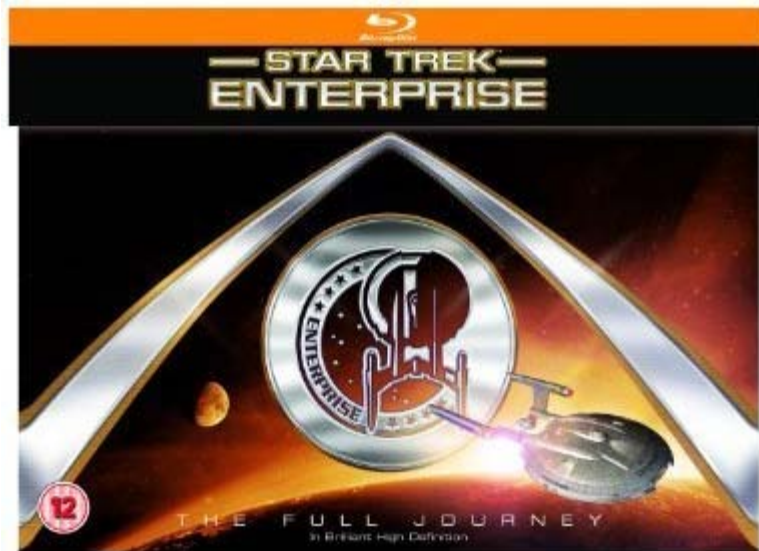
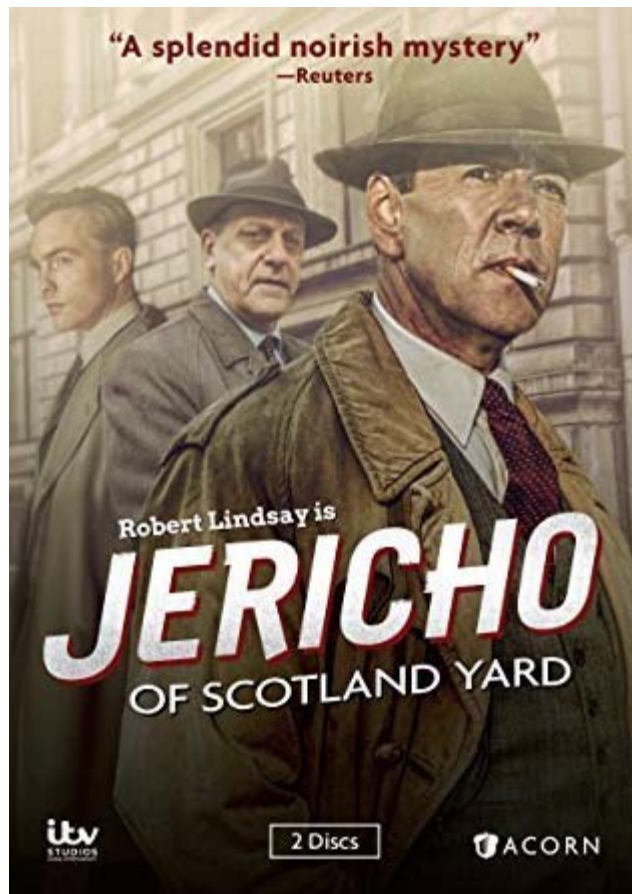
And here's the yin and yang of Criterion, the specialty label that pioneered extras and restored cuts and bonus material that turn most any movie into a master class for film buffs. They do two things again and again: present classic movies in sterling fashion and include movies I've never really heard of into the Criterion canon, introducing me and countless others into works that deserve wider appreciation. This week, the classic movie is *His Girl Friday*, the brilliant remake of *The Front Page* that switches gender for one character, trims the story, speeds up the dialogue to breakneck speed and produces a masterpiece. Nathan Lane is on Broadway right now with the stodgy original. It's an absolute shame the stage version of this remake isn't the vehicle he decided to do since it's superior in every way. Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell are in peak form and the love letter/satire of the paper business is a joy forever. Absolutely a joy from start to finish and the bonus features are so copious it's almost funny: *His Girl Friday* has been very nicely restored and they also include *The Front Page* in a newly discovered version that the director preferred, plus all sorts of interviews, not one and not two but three radio play all-star adaptations and much more.

But they're preaching to the choir with *His Girl Friday*. (It's on my short list of the best movies of 1940, right up there with *The Philadelphia Story* and *The Shop Around The Corner*.) Then Criterion releases *Something Wild* but instead of what I assumed was a welcome reissue of one of director Jonathan Demme's best

comedies, it turns out this *Something Wild* is a 1961 independent film I'd somehow completely missed. Forget Isabelle Huppert's *Elle*, this is a rape and revenge film made 55 years ago that is still ahead of its time in many ways. Starring Carroll Baker as a young woman who is brutally raped but then rescued from suicide by a gentle mechanic...who then keeps her captive. And what a creative team! Saul Bass did the title sequence, Eugen Shüfftan did the cinematography (he won the Oscar the following year for *The Hustler*) and classic composer Aaron Copland did the score. The extras include an audio recording of one of director Jack Garfein's master classes on acting.







RAY DONOVAN SEASON FOUR (\$42.99 DVD; Paramount)

CLOSE TO THE ENEMY (\$59.99 BluRay; Acorn Media)

BALLERS SEASON 2 (\$34.98 BluRay; HBO)

JERICHO OF SCOTLAND YARD SEASON ONE (\$49.99 DVD; Acorn Media)

STAR TREK: ENTERPRISE THE COMPLETE COLLECTION (\$TK BluRay; Paramount)

Liev Schrieber can fix everyone's life but his own in *Ray Donovan*, the crime drama about a "fixer" who makes problems go away for wealthy and powerful clients. Schrieber is a terrific actor and when he gets to go toe to toe with Jon Voight, Hank Azaria and others, the sparks really fly. He loves this complicated anti-hero and digs into the guy's moral gray areas with relish. There's no end game in sight a la the very different *Breaking Bad*, but here's hoping this series knows when to call it a day before they repeat themselves. Season five should debut this summer.

Writer-director Steven Poliakoff is the heir apparent to the late great UK auteur of TV Dennis Potter. Like Potter, it's hard to categorize Poliakoff after you've pointed out the obvious fact that he loves jazz. The miniseries *Dancing On The Edge* from 2013 followed the journey of an all-black jazz band in 1930s London. Three years later he has returned with the enigmatic miniseries *Close To The Enemy*. It's 1946 and shows bombed out London and specifically a bombed out hotel that's back in business and seeing Allied personnel all doing their damndest to win the post-war race to secure German expertise in everything from aviation to perfume and of course weaponry. You get an all star, international cast, some great period jazz and a refusal by writer-director Poliakoff to spell things out or take the obvious route. Viewers will be lured in by the period setting but easy to digest melodrama a la *The Crown* this ain't. Now what the heck will Poliakoff do next?

Professional athletes don't stop being competitive just because they retire. So in the *Entourage*-like show *Ballers*, Dwayne Johnson may be done with the NFL and tackling a new job as a financial adviser, but each season finds him hitting low and hard against anyone who gets in his way. Like *Arliss*, this seems strictly for sports nuts who want the occasional comedy to enjoy when there's no actual sporting event available to watch. Speaking of second acts, who knew Johnson would have such a varied career? I still wanna call him "The Rock" but to be fair I don't always think of that nickname whenever I read his name anymore. At least, not right away.

The effortlessly charming Robert Lindsay has won Tonys and BAFTAs and Olivier awards for his acting in shows like the stage musical *Me And My Gal* and the great TV series *Hornblower*. (Dear god, it's long past time for star loan Gruffud to get more of them made!) So no wonder they built a sturdy detective drama around Lindsay. Jericho was a Chief Inspector at Scotland Yard tackling all the big cases in 1950s London. The first and only season of *Jericho* (who had a Jewish background, a prostitute for a girlfriend and enjoyed public fame that made him abashed) included four stand-alone mysteries. Despite good reviews, the ratings were modest and the show was abandoned before it ever really got started. This set is a tad pricey for an almost-forgotten TV show that barely made an impression back in 2005. But for those who fancy British period mysteries, the intriguing nature of what might have been looms large.

Finally, there's the perennially frustrating *Star Trek* prequel series *Enterprise*, which starred Scott Bakula and almost always seemed to get in its own way. The early days of exploring space is a solid premise for a *Star Trek* TV show and Bakula made a fine captain. Perhaps they stayed away too much from the Star

Trek canon here and there, hobbling the show instead of building on what had come before. Still, they could get a good idea for a while and then seem to chicken out, the way *The Next Generation* did when it changed everything about the show with a Borg attack...and then backed away from the idea almost immediately. (The wonderful *Battlestar Galactica* reboot similarly shied away from a marvelous idea when it stranded the cast on a planet with obvious parallels to the military situation in Iraq and Afghanistan — only to squander a rich conceit that should have dominated an entire season in just a few episodes.) The courage of its own convictions was never the strong suit for this *Enterprise*, which boldly went where no *Star Trek* had gone before...until it panicked and fell back on tired plot devices in fear of uncharted territories. In other words it's a hot mess but with enough to recommend it to geeks, especially since this new set is significantly discounted compared to its last release. You can pick and choose the ideal episodes to watch (and the ideal ones to skip) and end up with 30 or so pretty damn good *Star Trek* tales.

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