

Blu-ray Feature: The 10 Best Blu-rays of 2011

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on December 7, 2011 - 1:43pm

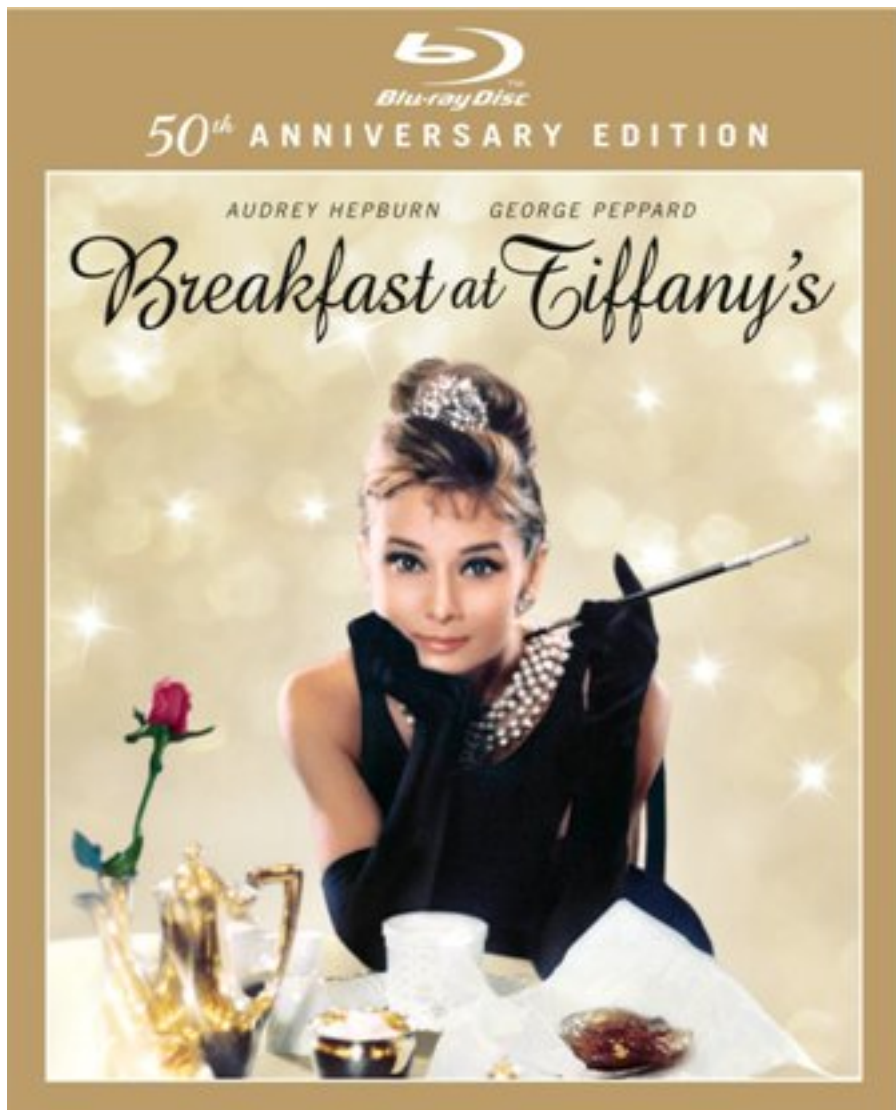
- [A Clockwork Orange](#) [2]
- [American: The Bill Hicks Story](#) [3]
- [Blu-ray Review](#) [4]
- [Breakfast at Tiffany's](#) [5]
- [Brian Tallerico](#) [6]
- [Citizen Kane](#) [7]
- [Fiddler on the Roof](#) [8]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [9]
- [List](#) [10]
- [Matt Fagerholm](#) [11]
- [Scarface](#) [12]
- [Taxi Driver](#) [13]
- [The Times of Harvey Milk](#) [14]
- [Theater, TV, DVD & Blu-Ray](#) [15]

CHICAGO – Does it say something about the current market of Blu-rays that nine of our top ten releases of the year (and, honestly, most of the runner-ups considered) are for catalog releases and special editions instead of films produced in the current era? More and more often, modern releases seem kind of lackluster. Throw on a featurette, maybe a deleted scene or two, and put it on the shelf.

More often, it is the anniversary editions, special release, and, of course, The Criterion Collection that lives up to the true potential of the format. Critics Matt Fagerholm and Brian Tallerico have assembled their ten best of 2011, all of which should be added to your collection as soon as possible. Or ask Santa if you think you've been good enough this year.

Matt Fagerholm's Five Best Blu-rays of 2011

5. "Breakfast at Tiffany's"



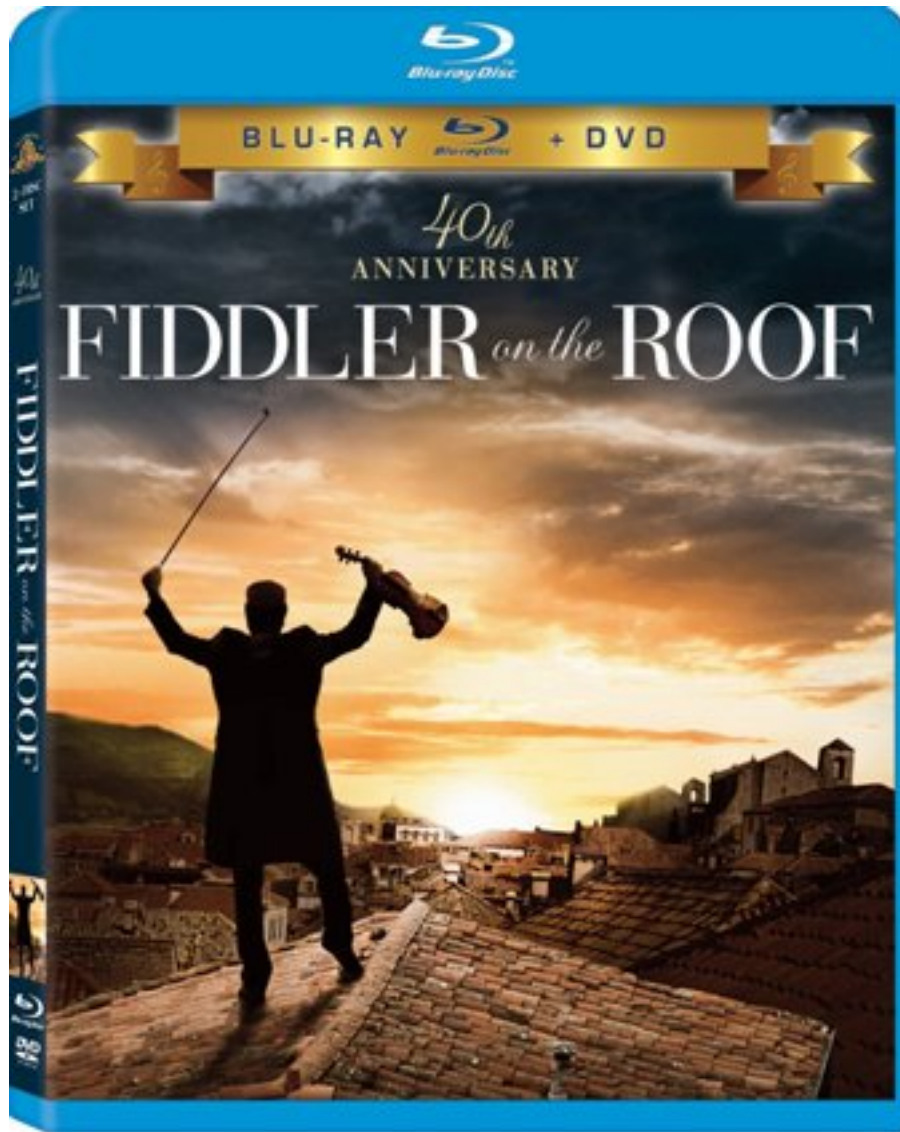
Breakfast at Tiffany's

Photo credit: Paramount

Though this 50th anniversary edition of Blake Edwards's iconic 1961 classic mainly offers featurettes recycled from past DVD releases, it is worth the purchase simply for its luminous restoration. The picture is sharper and the colors are more vibrant than ever, allowing Audrey Hepburn's grace and impeccable style to shine like never before. The screen legend's utter lack of vanity and unmistakable sweetness could even turn a gold-digging kleptomaniac like Holly Golightly into an irresistible heroine for the ages. It's her go-for-broke performance coupled with Henry Mancini's wistful score that makes the melodramatic finale such a timeless tearjerker. In the extras, both Edwards and producer Richard Shepherd adamantly voice their deep regret of casting Mickey Rooney as Hepburn's grotesque Japanese landlord. Yet instead of

ignoring this gaping flaw, the disc includes a superb featurette chronicling the depictions of Asians in American film, from Ming the Merciless in “Flash Gordon” to Hikaru Sulu in “Star Trek.”

4. “Fiddler on the Roof”

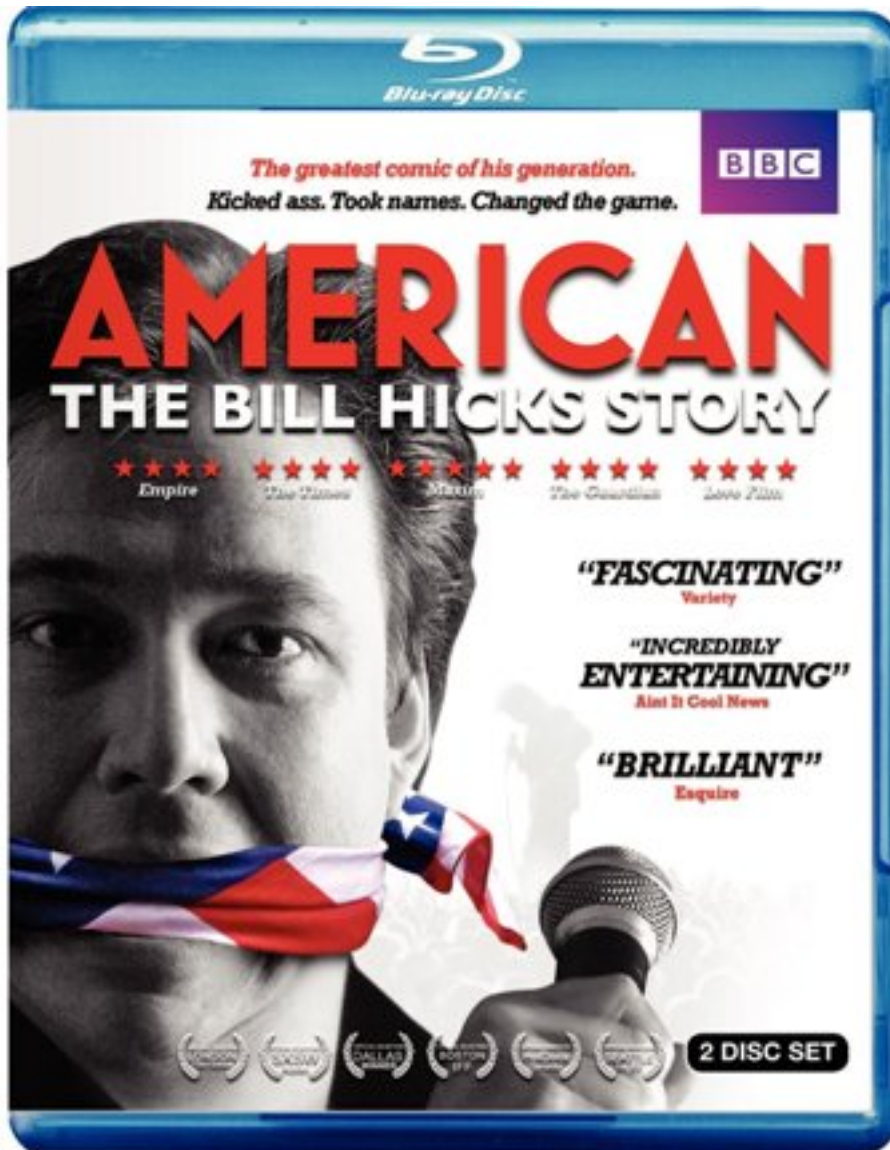


Fiddler on the Roof

Photo credit: MGM

One of the most purely enjoyable Blu-ray releases of the year was the 40th anniversary edition of Norman Jewison's 1971 classic, which offers a textbook example of the best possible way to make a musical for the big screen. Instead of casting a star like Zero Mostel, Jewison chose stage veteran Topol to reprise his role as Tevye, the impoverished father of five in Czarist Russia. Topol brings nuance to every “Daidle” and “Doddle” in his rousing showstopper, “If I Were a Rich Man,” and joins Jewison for a superb audio commentary that is one of many classy extras on the set (the director admits that he used clipped fragments of his own graying hair to age his 35-year-old leading man). Immortal composer John Williams, who deservedly won an Oscar for his adaptation of the score, is on hand for an interview where he recalls how he got violin virtuoso Isaac Stern to perform the brilliant opening cadenza.

3. “American: The Bill Hicks Story”

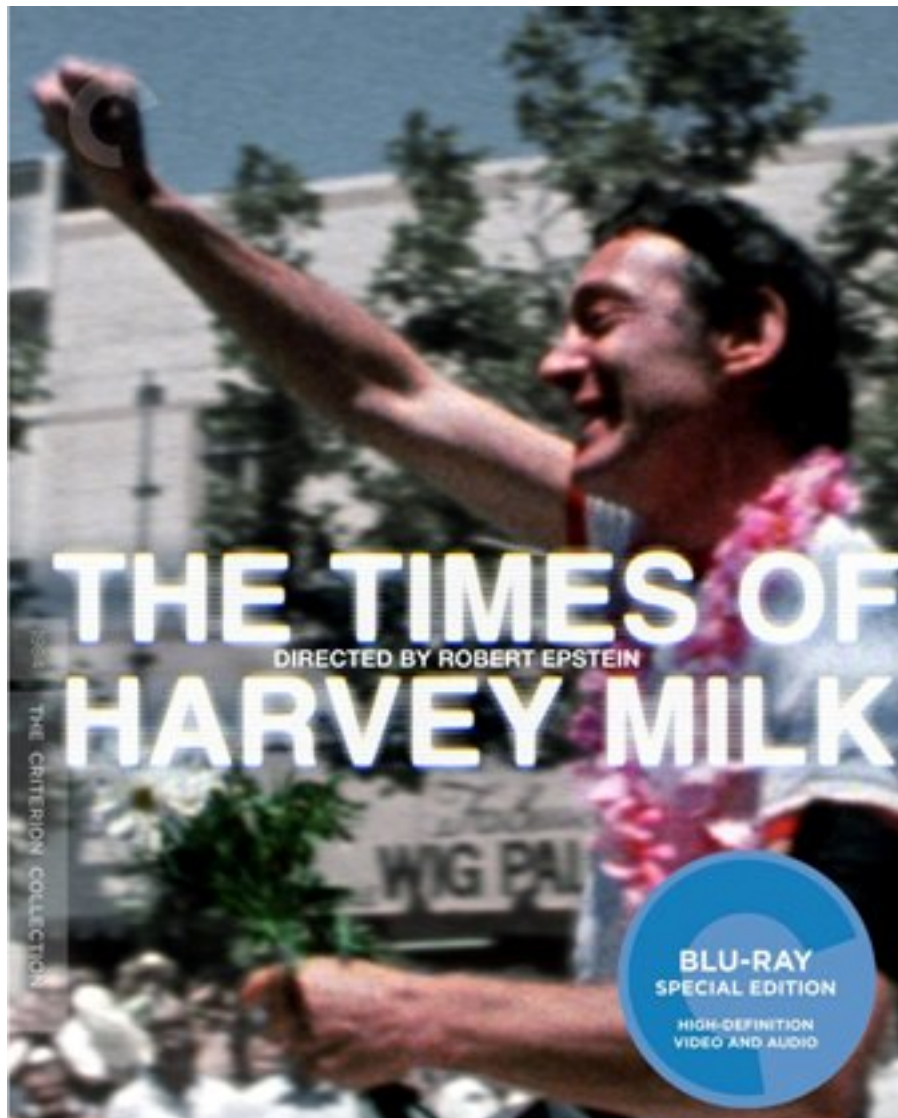


American: The Bill Hicks Story

Photo credit: BBC Warner

Aside from some distracting photo animation, Matt Harlock and Paul Thomas's 2009 documentary triumphantly built a convincing case that its titular subject was indeed the greatest comic of his generation. Before succumbing to cancer at age 32, Hicks fearlessly satirized America's sanctimonious culture while utilizing his stand-up routines as vehicles for enlightenment. The two-disc Blu-ray set includes five hours of special features, three of which are devoted to additional interviews expertly edited into subject-specific featurettes. Yet the real highlight of the extras is the additional footage of Hicks himself, who truly was one of the seminal voices of our time.

2. "The Times of Harvey Milk"

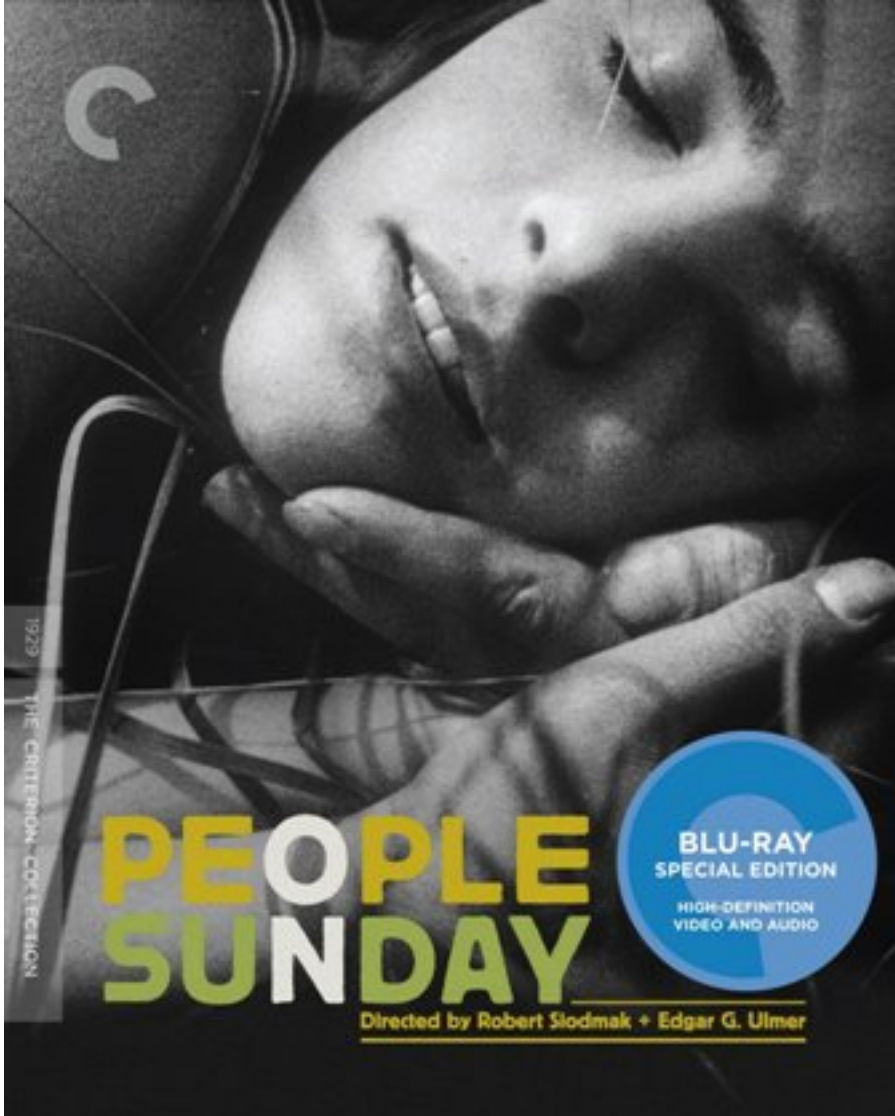


The Milk

Photo credit: The Criterion Collection

Another documentary about a vital figure in American culture was given a stellar Blu-ray release jam-packed with fascinating extras. Rob Epstein's profoundly moving 1984 Oscar-winner examined the movement surrounding the late San Francisco supervisor with priceless archival footage and illuminating interviews with members of his staff. Harvey Milk was the sort of grassroots political hero that would've never fit into our modern world of corporately controlled politics. This Criterion release boasts so many extras that it practically encourages viewers to conduct their own research. Highlights include extensive interviews with Milk's longtime boyfriend Scott Smith and political analyst Cleve Jones. There's also an infuriating 2003 panel discussion in which attorneys Doug Schmidt and Stephen Scherr justify their defense of Milk's assassin Dan White.

1. "People on Sunday"



People on Sunday

Photo credit: The Criterion Collection

As a precursor to both Italian Neorealism and the French New Wave, this silent German masterpiece from 1930 is a must-own for cinephiles. It marked an extraordinary collaboration between then-unknowns Robert Siodmak ("The Killers"), Edward G. Ulmer ("Detour"), Eugen Schüfftan ("The Hustler") and Billy Wilder ("The Apartment"), who sought to illustrate the universality of the human experience. As the weary citizens of Berlin lounge in the sun of Nikolassee beach, lustful urges and sordid betrayals emerge and evaporate in the summer haze. Criterion's high-definition restoration features an excellent making-of documentary, as well as Schüfftan's 35-minute directorial debut, "Into the Blue." To watch this film is to witness the birth of independent cinema.

Head on to page two for Brian Tallerico's top five...

Brian Tallerico's Five Best Blu-rays of 2011

5. "Blue Velvet"

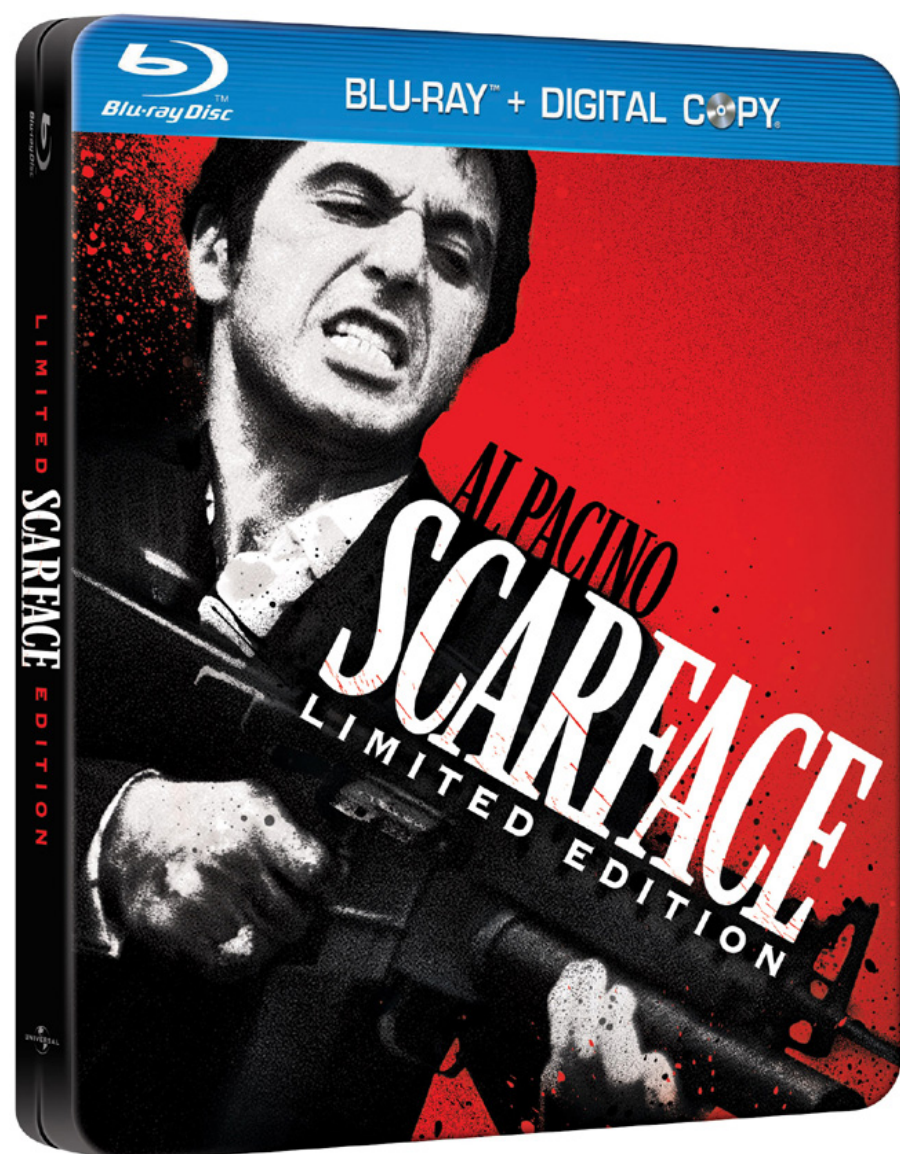


Blue Velvet

Photo credit: MGM

There are stories of lost footage in the history of cinema that are like holy grails for true movie nuts. The general assumption is that there is amazing cutting room floor footage out there sitting in a dank basement and we'll never get to see it. Lost spider footage from "King Kong," alternate cuts to "The Magnificent Ambersons," the original ending to "The Shining," entire movies from the '20s and '30s, etc. And one of the most apocryphal tales of editing lost to history was that of David Lynch's "Blue Velvet." Stories of flaming nipples and even a small part by Megan Mullally made the rounds and, lo and behold, the footage appeared on Blu-ray in 2011...and it's fascinating. Not only has one of the best movies of the '80s held up remarkably well (looking stunning with a perfect HD mix) but the near-hour of deleted scenes are like a window into an alternate version of the past. Riveting stuff.

4. "Scarface"

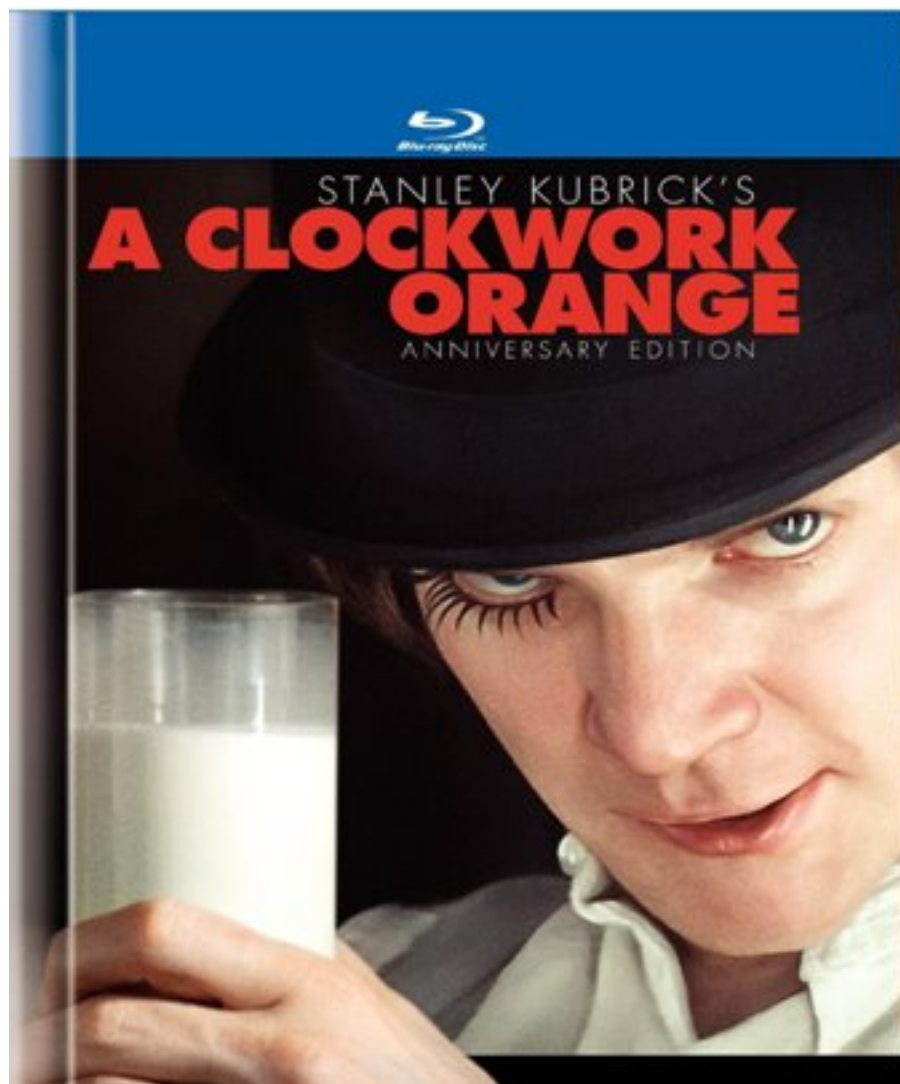


Scarface

Photo credit: Universal

Speaking of riveting, the pop culture phenomenon that is “Scarface” with video games and posters has somewhat overshadowed the fact that the movie is a damn good one from the prime of one of the most interesting filmmakers of the ’70s and ’80s. De Palma brilliantly pulls old-fashioned archetypes about the gangster into the bloody, coke-fueled, assault-weapon-carrying ’80s and gets one of the best performances of Al Pacino’s career in the process. The HD transfer is stunning with a perfect balance of color, and the special features are arguably the most impressive of the year with steelbook packaging, collectible cards, two U-Control features, and fun additions like “Scarface Scorecard” (track the f-bombs and deaths) and even clips of when they tried to show “Scarface” on TV. The set even includes the entire 1932 original film on its own disc. It’s truly a definitive edition of a beloved film.

3. “A Clockwork Orange”

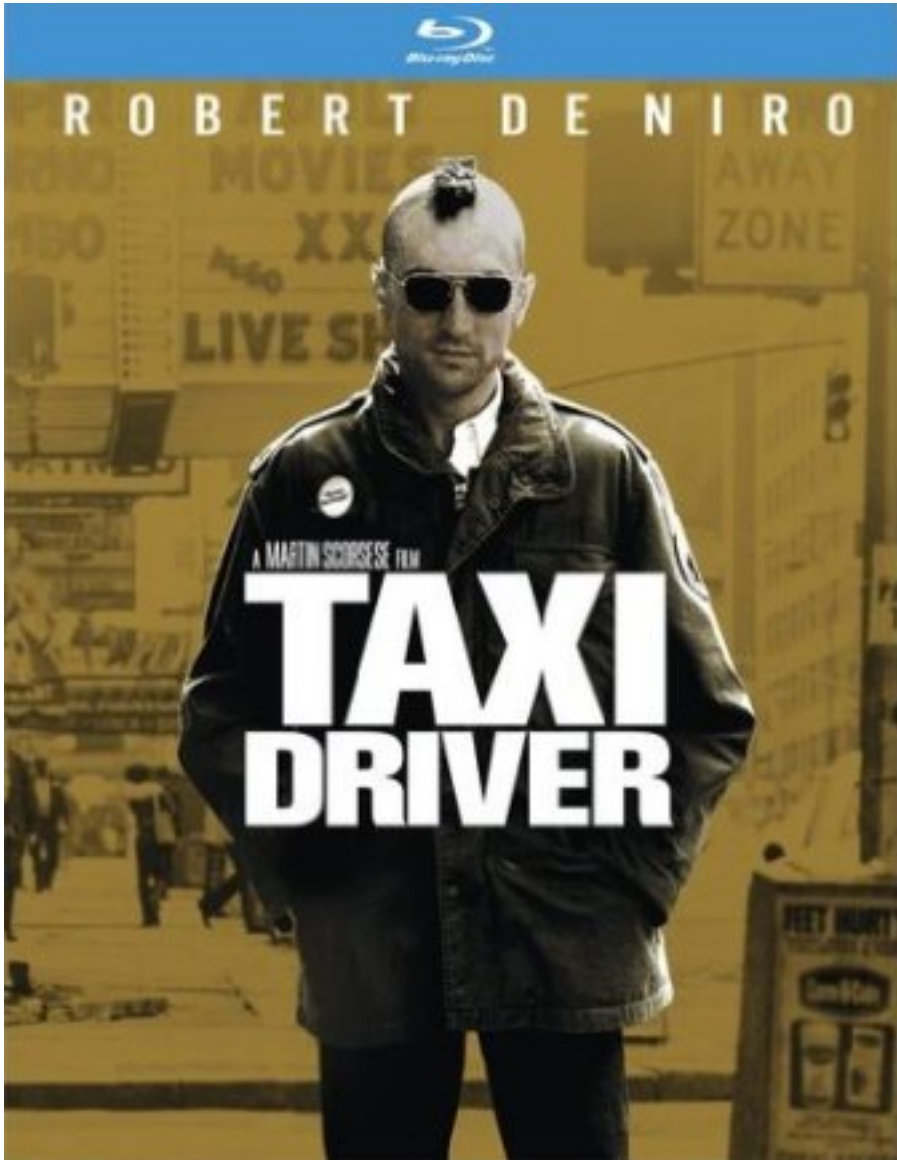


A Clockwork Orange

Photo credit: Warner Bros.

It’s been four decades since the release of one of Stanley Kubrick’s most notable films and the work has lost none of its power, especially when viewed with one of the best HD transfers yet produced. The special features here are spectacular, particularly a new one called “Turning Like Clockwork,” in which many of the major players (including Malcolm McDowell) and filmmakers inspired by the movie (including Oliver Stone) discuss its making and its importance. McDowell is a spectacular interview subject and the piece is very well-made, serving as both informational and in appropriate awe of its subject matter. Older bonus material is also included (a Channel Four documentary and a vintage featurette) along with a great commentary by McDowell and Historian Nick Redman. Kubrick was such a visual artist — the man’s eye for composition has influenced hundreds of filmmakers who dared follow in his footsteps — that he makes a perfect fit for HD.

2. “Taxi Driver”

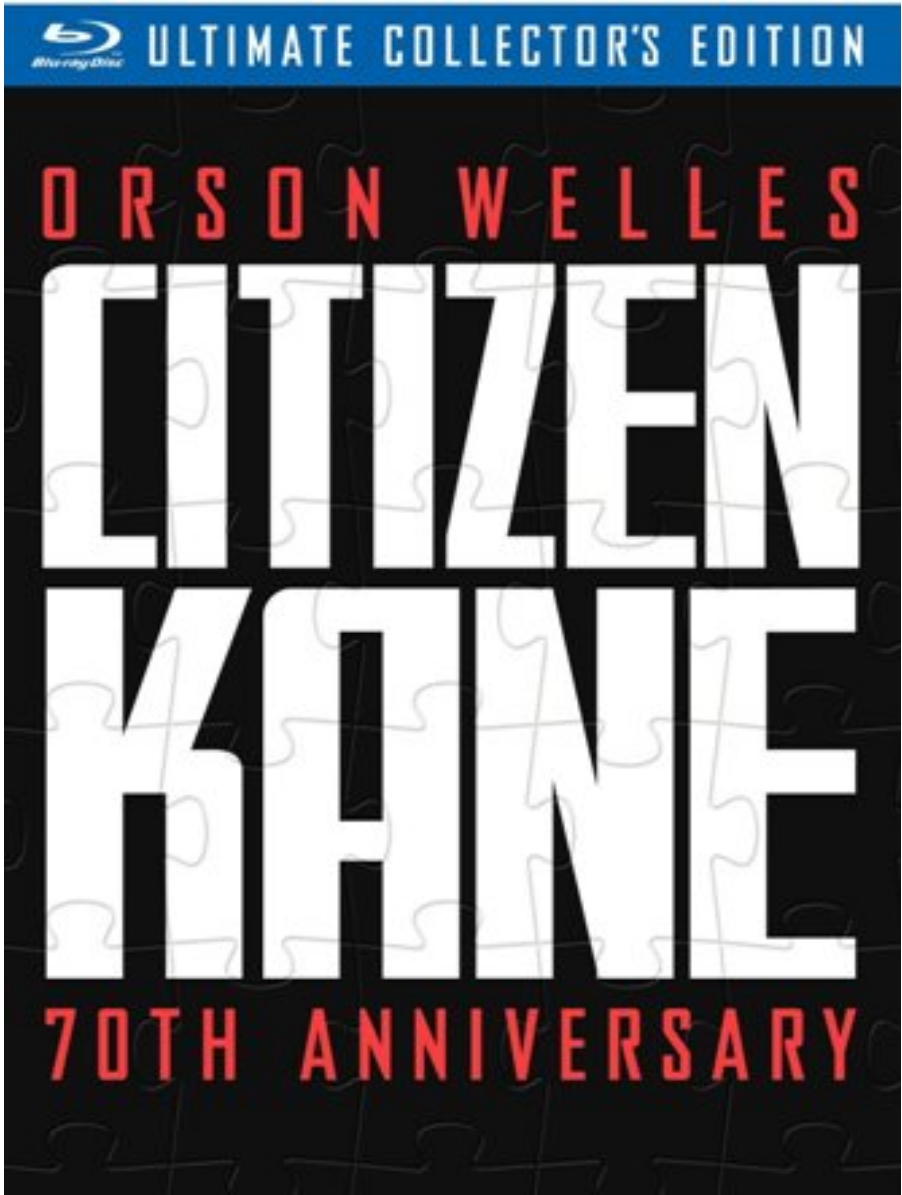


Taxi Driver

Photo credit: Sony

Fantastic special features, a stellar transfer, and a film that offers something new every time you see it — what more do you want from a Blu-ray? This is an absolute must-own. Martin Scorsese and cinematographer Michael Chapman oversaw an extensive 4k digital restoration for this release and it's a beauty — a film that looks great without looking overly polished. Can you imagine a “Taxi Driver” that scrubbed all the dirt off the picture by over-polishing it for HD? It could have been a disaster. It's a perfect transfer for a great film that doesn't disguise the fact that the movie is 35 years old but doesn't make it look dated either. Special features from the out-of-print Criterion edition were transferred along with commentaries by Scorsese & Paul Schrader, and tons of archival footage. A complete edition for one of the best films ever made.

1. “Citizen Kane”



Citizen Kane
Photo credit: Warner Bros.

It may seem like an obvious choice for a film critic to put what is widely considered the best film ever made at the top of a list like this one but it's not purely for how well Orson Welles' work has held up but as much for the completist, remarkable nature of the edition WB released for the film. This is an "Ultimate Collector's Edition" that lives up to that over-used title and does the work inside the justice that it has long-deserved. The set included amazing archival material, including two complete discs of related entertainment (a documentary and an HBO film) along with physical collectibles and a hardcover mini-book. Roger Ebert's audio track has been available before but it's still one of the best ever recorded. The set features replicas of posters, correspondence, and the souvenir program. It's the kind of box that gets you in the mood for a film before you even watch a frame. This is such a historically important film that it could have just spoken for itself with a standalone release but WB goes all-out for a film that arguably deserves special edition treatment more than any other in history, resulting in the best Blu-ray of the year.



[16]

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- [4] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/blu-ray-review>
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- [6] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/brian-tallerico>
- [7] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/citizen-kane>
- [8] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/news/fiddler-on-the-roof>
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