

Happy holidays and welcome to a look at some of the highlights arriving this week. This particular edition is filled with some huge titles and independent efforts – there is plenty to choose from and even a few gift ideas. So as always, if you can't make it out to the movies this week or need to stay indoors for a while, be sure to give one of these titles a try!

BIG NEW RELEASES!



AVATAR: THE WAY OF WATER: After its theatrical release at the end of 2022, the third-highest grossing film of all time worldwide (behind the original Avatar

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and

Avengers: Endgame)

is finally arriving on a variety of formats. In fact, there's a 4K Ultra HD and Blu-ray edition, a Best Buy exclusive in 4K Ultra HD and Blu-ray, and a 3D Blu-ray and regular Blu-ray version.

This sequel is set many years after the previous installment, where main characters Jake Sully and Ney'tiri have nurtured a family. When invading military forces arrive on Pandora once again, the leads move to a water-based community on the other side of the planet in order to protect their children. But they can only hide for so long and are eventually forced to face the villains in direct combat.

The movie was generally well-received by critics and earned Oscar nominations in numerous categories, including Best Picture. One-quarter of reviewers stated that the movie was too long and predictable with characters that weren't particularly interesting. However, the majority called the movie visually spectacular, action-packed and that the end result was the definition of epic filmmaking. They also appreciated the film's environmental themes.

It stars Sam Worthington, Zoe Saldana, Sigourney Weaver, Stephen Lang, Cliff Curtis, Joel David Moore, CCH Pounder, Edie Falco, Jemaine Clement and Kate Winslet.



THE EXORCIST: BELIEVER: Those looking for holiday counter-programming may be interested in this horror sequel. A photographer and widower panics after learning that his daughter has disappeared with a friend from school. The two are eventually located, but have no memory of what occurred and begin exhibiting strange behavior. Soon enough, the initially skeptical protagonist begins to believe that his daughter may have been possessed by a demonic force. He ends up receiving help on how to proceed from a place that will be familiar to fans of the original.

The press largely panned this effort. Less than one-quarter of notices were upbeat. They commented that the movie effectively delivered chills and enjoyed the message about various faiths working together to exercise evil forces. All others wrote that the movie was a cheaply produced and ineffective knock-off of a classic with an absurd story. Most importantly, they stated that the film didn't frighten them.

The cast includes Leslie Odom Jr., Ellen Burstyn, Ann Dowd, Lidya Jewett, Olivia O'Neill and Raphael Sbarge.

THE GHOST STATION: A train station attendant becomes fearful after a series of horrible accidents and workplace deaths occur. The individual contacts a reporter and friend, asking them to look into the incidents. Before long, the pair become certain that something supernatural is occurring at the station and begin to learn some disturbing secrets that may have caused the hauntings.

Very few critics in North America have seen this foreign-language South Korean effort and reaction to it has been weak. One reviewer called it unoriginal, but well-paced and stylishly made. The writer who panned the film commented that its lack of any new or original elements made it feel like an uneventful and unnecessary ghost yarn.

The movie features Kim Bo-ra, Kim Jaehyun and Shin So-yul.

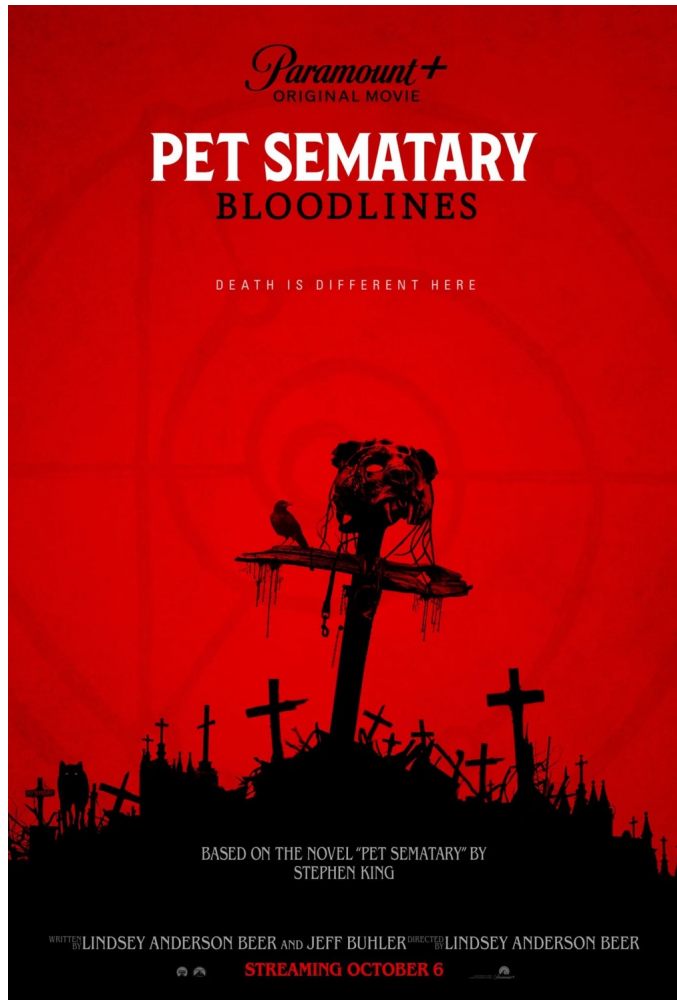
ONYX THE FORTUITOUS AND THE TALISMAN OF SOULS: This independent horror/comedy involves an "average joe" struggling within his community of Satanists. He agrees to attend a ritual by a powerful leader, hoping it will inspire him. However, the protagonist discovers that the important figure may actually be using his followers and planning to do something horrible to all of them. The lead must find a way to stand up to the threat and protect the other attendees.

Reaction toward this picture was slightly more positive than negative. Those who disliked it weren't taken by the main character and thought that the filmmakers failed to land many of the potentially humorous beats. Still, the majority liked the movie's quirkiness and called it both amusing and charming, saying it managed to amuse on a small budget.

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Andrew Bowser, Arden Myrin, Jeffrey Combs, Olivia Taylor Dudley, Rivkah Reyes and Terrence "T.C." Carson play the lead roles.



PET SEMATARY: BLOODLINES: And there's more horror arriving this week. This tale is a prequel inspired by the famous Stephen King novel and films. It is set in 1969 and features a young Jud Crandall (the senior who lived next to the leads in the 1989 and 2019 adaptations and advised the main characters that, "Sometimes dead is better."). After he and other youngsters discover the resurrecting power of the titular location, they do everything in their power to protect their town from undead forces.

This follow-up was initially made available for streaming on Paramount+ and is now arriving on disc. Notices were quite poor for the title. A small handful thought the movie presented an interesting backstory that would entertain fans of the original films. However, the consensus

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was that the flick never felt scary or delivered anything memorable, coming across like a missed opportunity at expanding on the source material.

It stars Jackson White, Natalie Alyn Lind, Forrest Goodluck, Isabella LaBlanc, Henry Thomas, David Duchovny, Samantha Mathis and Pam Grier.



THE RETIREMENT PLAN: A woman and her daughter get into trouble with a local criminal organization. Fearing for their lives, they decide to hide out with the mother's estranged and retired father, who is now a beach bum living in the Cayman Islands. When the villains suddenly arrive and threaten to kill the entire family, the dad surprises everyone by jumping into action. As it turns out, he has a secret past that his family never knew about.

This independent action/comedy earned decent reviews from the press. A sizable number did comment that the story was convoluted and that the action and jokes could have been handled with more skill. Still, more suggested that the cast was excellent and that once the picture veered away from action and focused on comedy elements, it improved significantly.

Nicolas Cage, Ron Perlman, Ashley Greene, Jackie Earle Haley, Grace Byers and Ernie Hudson headline the feature.

RUMBLE THROUGH THE DARK: A cash-strapped ex-fighter living in the Mississippi Delta is desperate to save the family home of his dying foster mother. When he loses cash to a powerful figure in town, the lead is forced to take part in bare-knuckle cage fighting in order to pay off the debt. A fight is eventually arranged with a particularly intimidating foe, and those closest to the hero beg him not to go through with the match.

Reaction was more positive than negative for this independent action feature. Some critics called all the characters unlikeable and couldn't get into the story, complaining that it was formulaic. But the majority complimented the lead performance. They noted that the star's work made an impression and that he got them through the predictable plot elements.

The movie features Aaron Eckhart, Bella Thorne, Ritchie Coster, Marianne Jean-Baptiste and Virginia Newcomb.

THE WANDERING EARTH II: The 2019 Chinese science-fiction epic *The Wandering Earth* involves a group of astronauts and scientists tasked with finding a new planet for humanity after ours ends up on a collision course with Jupiter. This prequel begins with the Earth facing another threat after the leads discover that the sun is dying out. The group must find a way to reignite the star and save the world.

Surprisingly, reaction to this follow-up was a little more upbeat than it was for the original film. A few reviewers did sound off that the movie was overlong and heavy-handed in its depiction of the world on the brink of disaster. But the vast majority admitted that the production was an entertaining spectacle. They wrote that the special effects were impressive and that the feature did a good job of developing characters so that viewers would be invested in their plight.

It stars Andy Lau, Jinh Wu and Xuejian Li.

WHAT HAPPENS LATER: This romantic comedy catches up with a pair of ex-lovers who cross paths at an airport. When they get snowed in and have to spend the night in each other's company, they start bickering once again. But as the time passes, the two discuss their past and begin to figure out why their relationship might have gone wrong. It leads them both to wonder if they could reconcile and perhaps even start anew.

The press was split right down the middle about this feature. Exactly half felt that the comedy wasn't quite up to snuff and that there was so much conflict between the leads that watching the character reunite wasn't much fun. Yet the same number thought the leads were great and had chemistry. They also appreciated the focus on older characters and thought it added something

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fresh and new to the mix, ultimately winning them over.

The cast includes Meg Ryan and David Duchovny.

BLASTS FROM THE PAST!

If you're looking for something a little older, you've got some great options as well.



The Warriors (1979) is one of those unusual cult films in that it was actually a big hit during its original theatrical run. It follows a gang from Coney Island who are set-up by a rival group for a murder they didn't commit. The leads must travel across Manhattan and get home before other outfits wipe them out. The film garnered a lot of public attention, but the studio began to pull it out of theaters because of a few incidents of gang violence at screenings. Critics didn't take to the movie at the time either.

They were wrong though. The movie is fast-paced, stylish and dynamic with solid work from its young cast and several iconic lines and sequences. The movie was released on DVD, but went out-of-print soon after. In 2005, Paramount reissued the movie in a new director's cut, first on DVD and later in Blu-ray with added visual effects that made the picture resemble a comic book.

Many fans (myself included), didn't like the changes. After years in limbo, Arrow Video is now presenting the original cut of the movie and the director's cut in either a "Limited Edition" 2-disc 4K Ultra HD set, or a "Limited Edition" 2-disc Blu-ray.

It comes with a 4K remaster from the original camera negative of both cuts. You'll also get a film expert commentary track, a new interview with director Walter Hill (The Long Riders, Southern Comfort

8 Hrs.

,
Streets of Fire

,
Red Heat,
Trespass

,
Last Man Standing)
, a lengthy roundtable discussion in which Josh Olson (co-writer of
A History of Violence)
and directors Lexi Alexander (
Green Street
) and Robert D. Kryzkowski (
The Man Who Killed Hitler and then Bigfoot)
express their love of
The Warriors

and the work of Walter Hill. There's a new interview with the editor, the costume designer, as well as the costume designs, an appreciation piece on the score and a look at the locations

used. There are a ton of archived extras included from the 2005 release as well that are wonderful. Additionally, it comes with a 100-page book on the movie, special packaging, a double-sided fold-out poster with original and newly commissioned artwork, six postcard-sized art-cards and gang logo stickers.



Arrow is also releasing the Blu-ray box set *Savage Guns: 4 Classic Westerns*, which contains the four spaghetti westerns

I Want Him Dead

(1968),

El Puro

(1969),

Wrath of the Wind

(1970),

The Four of the Apocalypse

(1975). The set contains 2K restorations of all movies from their original camera negatives. It also comes with two different versions of

El Puro

and

Wrath of the Wind

, film historian audio commentaries on every title, cast and crew interviews, publicity materials and much, much more.

Radiance Films is releasing a “Limited Edition” Blu-ray of the Japanese effort, *Elegant Beast* (1962). According to the distributor synopsis, it’s about a greedy, materialistic family that attempts to cover-up the embezzlement committed by the son while keeping their other schemes active. They discover there are other, equally conniving players involved. The disc includes a new 4K picture restoration, an interview and an appreciation of the movie with film critics, a visual essay on the movie and a trailer, as well as a double-sided sleeve with original and newly commissioned artwork and a booklet with writing on the movie and its importance. Only 3000 copies will be made available.

Life is Cheap... But Toilet Paper is Expensive (1989) is another Hong Kong title, this time arriving on Blu-ray from Arbelos. It's about a courier who gets into trouble while trying to deliver a briefcase to a mob boss. The disc comes with a new 4K restoration of the final cut approved by co-director Wayne Wang (Smoke, Blue in the Face).

Extras include an interview with Wang, another with Wang and the co-writer/co-director, the original chase sequence, a U.S. trailer and an essay on the movie.

35 Shots of Rum (2008) is arriving on Blu-ray from Cinema Guild. This French/German effort comes from Claire Denis (High Life) and involves the complicated relationship between a father and daughter after a handsome man comes between them. The disc includes interviews with Denis and more.

Kino is delivering Jess Franco's Sinner: The Secret Diary of a Nymphomaniac (1973) on Blu-ray. It contains both the original English and French language tracks, in addition to interviews with cast members and the editor. Those who purchase the disc early also get a slipcase.

Underworld (1985) aka Transmutations is a cheesy genre film about mutants living beneath London that is based on a story by Clive Barker. It must have developed a following, because it is now arriving in a 4K Ultra HD and Blu-ray set. Besides the picture upgrade, it comes with a director commentary, an alternate cut of the movie (on the Blu-ray), archival behind-the-scenes footage and publicity materials.

Les Vampires (1915) is a French silent feature about a reporter who battles a secret society of crooks (who are just known as "The Vampires" and aren't actually bloodsuckers). This Blu-ray was mastered from a 1996 picture restoration and comes with a trailer for the similarly-themed French movie Fantomas, as well as a slipcase.

Massacre Video is putting out a series of historical narrative horror/war/exploitation films set during WWII about the atrocities committed by the Japanese on Chinese prisoners. These movies are extremely violent and very hard to sit through, so be warned. They are limited to 5,000 copies and you can pick up Blu-ray of Men Behind the Sun (1988) aka Man Behind the Sun, Men Behind

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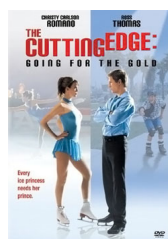
the Sun 2: Laboratory of the Devil

(1992) and

Men Behind the Sun 3: Narrow Escape

(1994). The first title has been given a 4K restoration and the sequels are cleaned up too. All are presented uncut for the first time in North America.

Made in Hong Kong (1997) is a Hong Kong crime picture about a marginalized loner who serves a Triad gang. Metrograph Pictures is delivering a Blu-ray of the movie with a film critic commentary track, interviews with the director and two of the producers, as well as a re-release trailer.



Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer is releasing some out-of-print titles on Blu-ray. You can now pick up AmericanEast

(2008), the ice-skating sequel,

The Cutting Edge: Going for the Gold

(2006), the Gene Hackman drama,

Eureka

(1983) and the British comedy,

The Rachel Papers

(1989).

Sandpiper Pictures is making Blu-rays available of the out-of-print titles like the comedy High Spirits (

1988), the sci-fi remake

Invaders from Mars

(1986) and

The Sure Thing (

1985). None of them have extras, but at least you can own them again on disc.

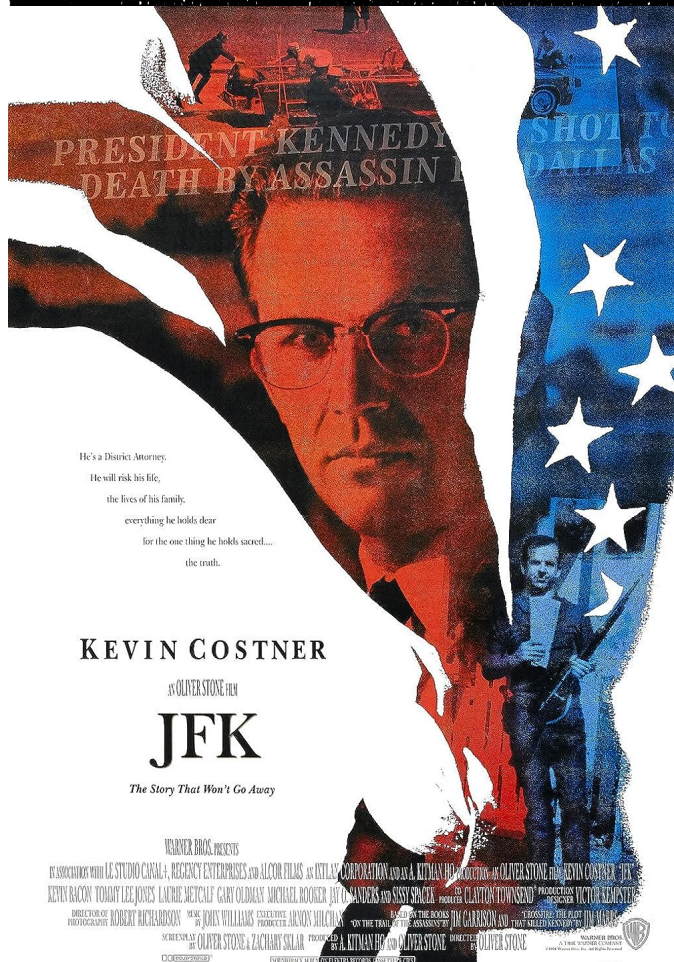
Bluray/DVD Roundup for December 22, 2023

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Great collection in 5-disc set, this one with **Tim Roth** (1998) in **Dead End** (1998) his
high quality, high feature, high quality, high quality



OLIVER STONE'S JFK (1991) is a historical drama film that explores the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. The film is a masterpiece of filmmaking, with a powerful performance by Kevin Costner as Jack Ruby. The film is a must-watch for anyone interested in American history and the assassination of President Kennedy. The film is available on Blu-ray and DVD.