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Everybody Gets a Cut

By TERRENCE RAFFERTY

A kiss, all moviegoers know, is just a kiss, and a sigh, by the same inexorable logic, is just a sigh, but I'm starting to wonder whether in the age of the DVD a movie -- even one as indelibly stamped on the collective memory as "Casablanca" -- can ever again be just a movie. The DVD's that have been piling up in the vicinity of my TV seem to be telling me that a movie is not a movie unless it arrives swaddled in "extras": on-set documentaries, retrospective interviews with cast and crew, trailers, deleted scenes, storyboards, even alternate endings. These days, any film for which a studio's marketing department has sufficiently high commercial expectations is issued on DVD in a "special" or "limited" or "collector's" edition that makes an Arden Shakespeare look skimpy by comparison. The extras on the new double-disc Director's Edition of Brett Ratner's "Red Dragon" include such indispensable material as hair and wardrobe tests and one of the auteur's N.Y.U. student films, and take as long to watch as the movie itself. We all, in our 21st-century paradise of leisure, have too much time on our hands. But not that much.

Should some scholar of the future be insane enough to take an interest in "Red Dragon," however, the annotated variorum edition of this deeply mediocre picture could be useful. And the as-yet unborn author of "Unfaithful Cinema: The Art of Adrian Lyne" (2040) will need to consult the Special Collector's Edition DVD of "Fatal Attraction," which contains the film's original ending as well as the one moviegoers saw. It also includes the director's own helplessly revealing comment on the radical difference between the conclusion he chose and the one he discarded: "You can make up your mind which you like better."

I've always thought it was the artist's job to make that sort of decision, but as I watched Lyne smugly leaving it up to the viewer, I realized with a jolt that I had fallen behind the times. I still think of a film as a unified, self-sufficient artifact that, by its nature, is not interactive in the way that, say, a video game is. To my old-media mind, the viewer "interacts" with a movie just as he or she interacts with any other work of art -- by responding to it emotionally, thinking about it, analyzing it, arguing with it, but not by altering it fundamentally. When I open my collected Yeats to read "Among School Children," I don't feel disappointed, or somehow disempowered, to find its great final line ("How can we tell the dancer from the dance?") unchanged, unchanged utterly, and unencumbered with an "alternate." For all I know, Yeats might have written "How can we tell the tailor from the pants?" and then thought better of it, but I'm not sure how having the power to replace the "dance" version with the "pants" version would enhance my experience of the poem.

And although "Among School Children" is divided into eight numbered stanzas and therefore provides what DVD's call "scene access," I tend to read them consecutively, without skipping, on the theory that the poem's meaning is wholly dependent on this specific, precise arrangement of words and images. If you read "Among School Children" in any other way, would it still be "Among School Children"? Would it be a poem at all?
The contemporary desire for interactivity in the experience of art derives, obviously, from the heady sense of control over information to which we've become accustomed as users of computers. The problem with applying that model to works of art is that in order to get anything out of them, you have to accept that the artist, not you, is in control of this particular package of "information." And that's the paradox of movies on DVD: the digital format tries to make interactive what is certainly the least interactive, most controlling art form in human history.

When you're sitting in a movie theater, the film is in absolute, despotic control of your senses. It tells you where to look and for how long, imposes its own inarguable and unstoppable rhythm, and your options for interaction are pretty severely limited. You can wise off quietly to your companion or loudly at the screen, or, in extremis, you can walk out, but nothing you can do, short of storming the projection booth, will affect the movie itself: it rolls on serenely without you, oblivious as the turning world.

It's that imperious, take-it-or-leave-it quality that, in the early days of cinema, aroused the suspicions of devotees of the traditional arts, who would argue that watching a film denied the audience some of the freedoms available to readers -- who could set their own pace rather than meekly submit to a rhythm imposed on them by the creator of the work -- and to theatergoers who were at liberty to look wherever they wanted to at the action on stage and whose reactions could actually affect the play's performance. Eventually, we all learned to stop worrying and love the art form, but the skeptics and reactionaries had a point: the techniques of film are unusually coercive, a fact quickly grasped both by the art's early masters, like D.W. Griffith, Fritz Lang, Sergei Eisenstein and Alfred Hitchcock, who reveled in their ability to manipulate the viewer's responses, and by the leaders of totalitarian states, who recognized cinema's potential as an instrument of propaganda.

The manipulative power of cinema is neither a good nor a bad thing; it is what it is, and all movies partake of it in varying degrees. The films of Jean Renoir, for example, are markedly freer than those of Hitchcock, but the freedom they offer is relative; although the long takes, deep focus and improvisatory acting style of Renoir's "Rules of the Game" (1939) allow the viewer's imagination more room to roam, the director is nonetheless in complete control of what we see and what we hear. In fact, just about the only way a film artist can subvert his or her own authority is by significantly limiting the use of the medium's expressive resources, as, for example, Andy Warhol did in the mid-60's. His eight-hour-long "Empire" (1964), a single shot of the Empire State Building, with no cuts, no camera movement and no sound, is about as uncoercive as a film can be. It's the most interactive movie ever made.

All I'm saying, really, is that watching a film is, and should be, an experience different from that of playing Myst or placing an order on Amazon. I suspect that many DVD owners use their players exactly as I do, as a way of recreating as nearly as possible at home the experience of seeing a film in a theater. The DVD picture is sharp, the sound is crisp and the film is almost invariably presented in its correct aspect ratio -- i.e., letterboxed for movies made in wide-screen process, as all but a few since the mid-50's have been. The DVD player is, by common consent, the best-selling new device in consumer-electronics history. It's said that the "market penetration" of DVD players (which were introduced in 1997) into American homes is progressing at a rate twice that of the VCR. And the unprecedented "penetration" of this format cannot be attributed solely to the Rohypnol of advertising

hype; the DVD is a distinct improvement over the videocassette, and even over the extinct laserdisc.

But the DVD is a gift horse that demands to be looked squarely in the mouth, because it has the potential to change the way we see movies so profoundly that the art form itself, which I've loved since I was a kid, is bound to suffer. What does it mean, for example, when a director recuts or otherwise substantially alters the theatrical-release version of his or her film for the DVD, as Peter Jackson did for the four-disc Special Extended Edition of "The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring"? This cut, half an hour longer than the film that was shown in theaters and that sold millions of copies in its first two-disc DVD incarnation just four months earlier, is obviously the definitive version of "Fellowship": clearer, fuller, richer emotionally and kinetically. Better late than never, I guess, but I still felt a little cheated at having to watch this grand, epic-scale adventure on the small screen. And don't the hardy souls who every now and then peel themselves off their Barcaloungers, trek to the multiplex, stand in line for $4 sodas and dubious popcorn and then subject themselves to the indignity of sitting in a room with hundreds of rank strangers -- don't they deserve the best version of the movie? At least when Steven Spielberg re-edited and digitally rejiggered his "E.T.: the Extraterrestrial," he had the decency to give it a brief stopover in movie theaters on the way to its final destination as a multidisc Limited Collector's Edition DVD.

It's thoughtful of Spielberg, too, to include in the DVD package, alongside the spiffy new "E.T.," a disc containing the original 1982 theatrical version of that justly beloved movie, which is not only the sole extra worth watching in the whole overstuffed grab bag of goodies -- what viewers, I wonder, are thrilled to discover therein a two-hour film of John Williams conducting the score at the Shrine Auditorium? -- but is also a stern warning to filmmakers who might be tempted to tinker with their past work: in almost every respect the old version is better. Although the two brief scenes Spielberg has restored to the picture are nice, you wouldn't miss them if they weren't there (as the filmmaker evidently didn't when he left them on the cutting-room floor two decades ago), and the digital removal of the guns carried by the government agents in the original's climactic chase just seems silly.

What's most damaging to "E.T." is the way Spielberg has tampered with the movements and facial expressions of the eponymous alien itself. A team of computer wizards has labored mightily to make E.T. cuter -- an undertaking that, as even those of us who admire the picture would have to agree, has a distinct coals-to-Newcastle quality.

I'm sure most filmmakers occasionally look at their past movies and wish they'd done one thing or another differently, but before the rise of the DVD, they rarely received much encouragement (i.e., financing) to roll up their sleeves, get under the hood and fine-tune or soup up their vintage machines. That state of affairs changed when the consumer-electronics industry discovered, to its delight, that many members of its affluent and highly penetrable market could be induced to buy the same entertainment product, with variations, over and over again. (One day you wake up to find you have 17 ways of listening to Elvis's "Heartbreak Hotel." ) For movie lovers, a new DVD Director's Cut of "The Fellowship of the Ring" or "E.T." or "Apocalypse Now" or even "X-Men" can be a powerful incentive to reach for the wallet yet one more time.

The restoration of older films that were mutilated before their theatrical release or that have suffered from disfiguring wear and tear is, of course, welcome. There's every reason to shell out for the DVD's of David Lean's "Lawrence of Arabia," Hitchcock's "Vertigo" and "Rear Window," with their images and sounds, which had faded badly over the years, now buffed by crack restorers, and Orson Welles's
baroque 1958 noir "Touch of Evil," which replaces the distributor's release cut with a version that conforms more closely to the director's own extensive notes on the editing of the film. (Like the new "E.T.," all those restorations played briefly in theaters.) In each of those cases, the DVD allows us to see the film as its maker wanted it to be seen.

But most of the current mania for revision appears to be driven by motives other than a burning desire for aesthetic justice. It's not that I don't believe Steven Spielberg when he says that his "perfectionist" impulses were what spurred him to rework "E.T."; it's that I don't believe that without the financial incentive of DVD sales he would have given in to those impulses -- or, perhaps, felt them at all. Although the film's 20th anniversary, last year, supplied a pretext for revision, nothing in the finished new version argues very strongly for its necessity. God knows, there are DVD packages far crasser than the Limited Collector's "E.T." (For an especially pungent recent example, see "X-Men 1.5.") I'm picking on Spielberg here because he's a great filmmaker and a man who loves and respects the history of his art; if even he can be seduced into tampering with his own work, then the innocent-looking little DVD is rolling us down a very steep slope indeed.

Revisiting past work is almost never a good idea for an artist. Every work of art is the product of a specific time and a specific place and, in the case of movies, a specific moment in the development of film technology. Sure, any movie made before the digital revolution could be "improved" technically, but the fact is that the choices the director made within the technical constraints of the time are the movie. It wasn't so long ago, maybe 15 years, that filmmakers took up arms against Ted Turner and his efforts to "modernize" old black-and-white films by computer-coloring them. Colorization was an easy target, both because the process was surpassingly ugly and because it was inflicted on films without the consent of their makers. But would the principle have been any different if the colorization technology had been better, or if the directors had somehow been persuaded to perform the evil act themselves, on their own movies, of their own apparent free will? If Georges Melies, the wizardly animator of silent cinema, were alive today, would he boot up his computer and take another crack at "A Trip to the Moon"? Would we think more highly of him if he did?

That's kind of where we are with DVD's today. We're all well past the point of being shocked at the compromises people make in the name of commerce, but I still wonder why filmmakers have been so meekly compliant with the encroaching revisionism and interactivity of the digital format. For many, I suppose, it's simply a matter of taking the bad with the good. The huge upside of the DVD, for filmmakers, is that it makes their work widely available, in a form that more or less accurately reflects their intentions: they long ago learned to live with the reality that ultimately more people would see their films on a small screen than on a large one -- the directors of Spielberg's generation themselves received a fair amount of their movie education from television -- and at least on DVD the movies aren't interrupted by commercials or squashed into a "full-frame" presentation. So the filmmakers tell themselves, I guess, that the more insidious features of the format don't really matter: that the making-of documentaries don't make them sound like hucksters and blowhards; that the deleted scenes and alternate endings don't subtly impinge on the formal unity of the work; that all the revisions and digital tweaks they agree to don't undermine the historical integrity of the picture; that voice-over commentaries don't drown the movie in a torrent of useless information; that scene access doesn't encourage viewers to rearrange the film to their own specifications; that the user-friendly conventions of the format will not steadily erode the relationship between movies and their audience.

The men and women who make films need to put up more resistance to the rising tide of interactivity,
because, "Casablanca" notwithstanding, there's no guarantee that the fundamental things will continue to apply as time goes by. The more "interactive" we allow our experience of art -- any art -- to become, the less likely it is that future generations will appreciate the necessity of art at all. Interactivity is an illusion of control; but understanding a work of art requires a suspension of that illusion, a provisional surrender to someone else's vision. To put it as simply as possible: If you have to be in total control of every experience, art is not for you. Life probably isn't, either. Hey, where's the alternate ending?

There's not much point speculating on what the ending will be for the strange process of DVD-izing cinema. Many suspect that the DVD is already the tail wagging the weary old dog of the movies. Will the interactive disc ultimately become the primary medium, with film itself reduced to the secondary status of raw material for "sampling"? Maybe; maybe not. The development of digital technology, along with the vagaries of the marketplace, will determine the outcome, and neither of those factors is easily predictable. What's safe to say, I think, is that the DVD -- at least in its current, extras-choked incarnation -- represents a kind of self-deconstruction of the art of film, and that the DVD-created audience, now empowered to take apart and put together these visual artifacts according to the whim of the individual user, will not feel the awe I felt in a movie theater when I was young, gazing up at the big screen as if it were a window on another, better world.

I no longer look at movies with quite that wide-eyed innocence, of course, but it's always there somewhere in the background: an expectation of transport, as stubborn as a lapsed Catholic's wary hope of grace. Perhaps the DVD generation, not raised in that moviegoer's faith, will manage to generate some kind of art from the ability to shuffle bits and pieces of information randomly -- the aleatory delirium of the digital. It just won't be the art of D.W. Griffith, Jean Renoir, Francois Truffaut, Sam Peckinpah, Andrei Tarkovsky and Roman Polanski.

Feeling slightly melancholy, I call up David Lynch, who is not only a director whose works -- "Blue Velvet," "Mulholland Drive" -- demand a pretty high level of surrender on the part of the viewer, but also one who has in recent years refused to allow voice-over commentary or scene access on the DVD's of his movies. "The film is the thing," he tells me. "For me, the world you go into in a film is so delicate -- it can be broken so easily. It's so tender. And it's essential to hold that world together, to keep it safe." He says he thinks "it's crazy to go in and fiddle with the film," considers voice-overs "theater of the absurd" and is concerned that too many DVD extras can "demystify" a film. "Do not demystify," he declares, with ardor. "When you know too much, you can never see the film the same way again. It's ruined for you for good. All the magic leaks out, and it's putrefied."

He's not opposed to DVD per se. Lynch just finished supervising the DVD of his first feature, "Eraserhead" (1976), which, while eschewing the usual commentary and chapter stops, will contain a few extras (the nature of which he declines to reveal). We spend a few minutes discussing one of his favorite DVD's, the Criterion Collection's "Complete Monterey Pop," and agree that D.A. Pennebaker's groundbreaking concert film is the sort of movie the format serves well; even the scene access is, in this case, mighty useful. But Lynch says that filmmakers need to be very careful about the way they present their delicate, tender creations on DVD. "Don't do anything to hurt the film, and then you're rockin'."

I hang up, leaving David Lynch to rock on, and find that I'm feeling more hopeful that the relationship between movies and their audience will survive the current onslaught of interactivity -- that this need
not be the beginning of the end of a beautiful friendship. So I dig out the no-frills DVD of "Mulholland Drive," slide it into its little tray and pick up the remote. And I tell the machine to play it.

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