



Getting the DVD Transfer Right the Second Time Around

Next Arti

Movies



Criterion Collection

Jonathan Chang, left, and Wu Nienjen in Edward Yang's Taiwanese comedy-drama "Yi Yi." The film's first DVD release was a disaster; a new version is a vast improvement.

By FRED KAPLAN
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"Yi Yi," the Taiwanese director Edward Yang's lyrical comedy-drama about a family's crises in contemporary Taipei, was arguably the best film of 2000, the worst DVD of 2001 and now — with a newly restored disc from the Criterion Collection — one of the best DVD's of 2006.

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The earlier disc, released by Fox Lorber (and still available from its successor, Wellspring Video), was a famously terrible transfer. The Web site dvdbeaver.com, which reviews the video quality of DVD's, called it "a joke."

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The original 35-millimeter film, which opened at [Film Forum](#) in New York in October 2000 (and eventually played at 15 American theaters, grossing nearly \$1 million), looked gorgeous. The Fox Lorber DVD, which hit the bins a mere seven months later, was unwatchable.

Images were blurry. Colors wavered between washed-out and oversaturated. The frame often jittered. And whenever the picture included closely spaced horizontal lines (say, a windowsill, a wire fence or brick wall, a stairway, even the cracks on a sidewalk), the lines wiggled like crazy, a distortion known as moiré, common to some degree in film-to-digital transfers.

But it was particularly glaring here. [“Yi Yi,”](#) though a tender, even lighthearted film, deals with the displacement of globalization and the fragile boundaries between the private and the public; it’s about barriers and links of all kinds. Mr. Yang conveys these themes in a potent visual language, so nearly every scene features windows, walls and fences. Which means that on the Fox Lorber DVD, nearly every scene was saturated with wiggly waves.

Most of this mess has been cleaned up on the Criterion DVD. Images are crisp and focused, colors are rich and true, the frame doesn’t shake, and the moiré erupts rarely, and even then just slightly.

So why did the first DVD turn out so badly and the second one so well? There are two broad reasons. First, digital technology has vastly improved since 2001, when Fox Lorber’s version came out. Second, Fox Lorber was in a hurry to make its DVD; Criterion wasn’t.

It’s worth recalling that the DVD is a fairly new thing. The first players and discs hit American shelves in 1997. (And only in 2003 did DVD rental fees surpass those for VHS tapes.) Yet as early as 1998, Fox Lorber had put out 100 DVD titles, including classics by François Truffaut, [Jean-Luc Godard](#), [Eric Rohmer](#) and [Akira Kurosawa](#). The Criterion Collection, which in the early 90’s created the market for classic films on laser disc, had put out one quarter as many DVD’s.

“We were one of the first companies to aggressively embrace the DVD format,” said Richard Lorber, chairman of Fox Lorber at the time. “No one knew whether the DVD business would take off. No one had the confidence to make much of an investment.”

Yet Fox Lorber’s commitment had a downside. Films were rushed to the marketplace; quality control was brushed aside. In September 2001, Wellspring Media bought Fox Lorber, overhauled its in-house production system and licensed several of its more prestigious titles, including those by Truffaut and Godard, to Criterion, which had released some of them on laser disc.

“Yi Yi” got left behind. The digital master was made in 2000 at an outsourced facility in Hong Kong, and the discs were produced around the same time as the change in ownership, too soon to reap the shift’s benefits.

Like most DVD’s of the era, it was mastered in standard definition, meaning that each frame consisted of 480 horizontal lines, like American television broadcasts. These days, nearly all DVD’s are mastered in high definition, with 1,080 lines. The master for Criterion’s “Yi Yi” was created on a machine called

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INSIDE 1

a Spirit 4K, which scans a 35-millimeter negative (or copy of a negative) at 4,000 lines. That is, it scans each frame 4,000 times, encoding a new line with each pass.

The more lines there are in a digital master, the more seamless and realistic the image looks: higher resolution, clearer details, richer colors, smoother movements and fewer digital distortions like moiré.

“You get moiré when the horizontal lines in a picture don’t fall into place with the horizontal lines of the signal,” said Criterion’s technical director, Lee Kline. So if the image is scanned with more lines, there’s a higher chance they will coincide with those in the picture.

No one used 4K scanners to master DVD’s six years ago.

The earlier DVD also displayed lots of scratches. Film scratches easily. Some of these scratches can be removed by computer programs that didn’t exist six years ago. Vertical scratches, however, can be removed only by hand, one frame at a time. In an early scene of “Yi Yi,” where an 8-year-old boy, Yang-Yang, is sitting at his desk in school, a blue vertical scratch appears on the screen for seven seconds. It took Criterion’s technicians two days to erase it. Few studios even today, much less the Hong Kong facility that made Fox Lorber’s DVD six years ago, would go to the trouble.

In the earlier DVD’s — not just in Fox Lorber’s but also in a European and a South Korean version — the frame shakes slightly about a dozen times. “Yi Yi” was filmed mainly in long shots, with the camera kept still. So the shakiness was all the more noticeable.

Criterion’s engineers noticed this same jitter in the otherwise superb 35-millimeter inter-positive (a copy of a film negative) they used as their source. As it happened, they had just finished another project where they used a software program called Shake. The cursor is put on a fixed object in the frame; the program stabilizes the object and, by extrapolation, everything else in the frame.

“It took weeks to get rid of the shaking,” said Curtis Tsui, the producer of Criterion’s “Yi Yi” disc. “You have to have the personnel and the time to do that. Not everybody does.”

Criterion is hardly the only DVD house known for fastidiousness. Warner Home Video, Universal, Columbia TriStar, 20th Century Fox and Disney are also often singled out for praise. In fact, almost no major studio these days makes DVD’s that look terrible. And when they do, it’s usually an aberration or because the film is in irreparable condition.

The Fox Lorber “Yi Yi” is a holdover from the days, not so long ago, when few studios knew what they were doing with the new medium. The Criterion “Yi Yi” reveals what can be accomplished by a half-decade of technical advances combined with old-fashioned care.

Fred Kaplan is a columnist for Slate.

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