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FAMILY

To Tell the Truth, the Cover Often Doesn't

A woman on the video box of 'Persuasion' bears no resemblance to anyone in the movie. It's not the only title in a deceptive package.

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Jane Austen has never been a hotter Hollywood commodity than now. Yet her name alone wasn't enough when Columbia TriStar Home Video designed the video box art for its 1995 movie "Persuasion." The studio opted for an image more in keeping with a bodice-ripper than a genteel period drama. Austen still gets above-the-title billing, but the woman on the cover bears scant resemblance to the movie's dowdy heroine.

"It's, like, who's this woman leaning forward with the cleavage?" says Sam Franklin, manager of a Seattle Rain City Video store.

"I don't know who that woman is, but she's not in the movie," says Byl Holte, buyer for Philadelphia's TLA Video chain.

There's no heaving bosom on the cover of "Sense and Sensibility," coming out June 25. Another Columbia TriStar release based on a Jane Austen novel, this one features its high-octane stars--Emma Thompson, Kate Winslet and Hugh Grant--in demure garb true to the movie.

The difference between these two covers is telling. With a bevy of stars and Academy Award recognition, "Sense and Sensibility" was considered a sure thing in the rental arena; lacking the star power and box-office clout, "Persuasion" was not. Hence, the come-hither box art.

The "Persuasion" cover, says Columbia TriStar Executive Vice President Paul Culberg, was designed to "broaden the audience beyond the draw of Jane Austen's name."

"Due to the lack of sufficient art to maximize the video box format, models were used in place of the available actors in the film," he says.

'Persuasion' isn't the only recent video to suggest one thing and deliver another. Competing for attention in a crowded marketplace, studios have taken an increasingly creative approach to box art design. Marketing make-overs are endemic among art-house titles--Disney's Miramax arm, a leading distributor of independent films, is known for taking liberties with box art. New box art is also commonly used for the re-release of pre-stardom clunkers and made-for-television or cable fare.

The tactic may help smaller movies stand out from the pack, but misleading box art can be an annoyance for renters trolling the aisles.

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Think that movie's a lighthearted romp? It could be a three-hankie weepie about a boy coping with the terminal illness of his mother, such as "Unstrung Heroes," another 1995 release. Judging by the laughing faces on the box, however, you might think the movie was a real thigh-slapper and get caught without a tissue.

Box art is largely a matter of personal taste. It's very subjective, responds a spokesman for Buena Vista Home Video, distributor for "Unstrung Heroes" and Miramax Home Video releases. "However, our cassettes almost always contain synopses and reviewer quotes, allowing the public to be led by the critics if they want to be."

As the "Persuasion" box art illustrates, cleavage shots can be misleading too: They don't necessarily herald sexy movies, and you can't count on seeing the curves in the movie either. The sultry woman with a plunging neckline on the box art for "Bhaji on the Beach" is nowhere to be seen in the 1994 film, a low-key feminist tale about a group of Asian Indian women coping with racism and wife abuse in England, released by Columbia TriStar Home Video.

"Great movie, bad box art," says Jerri Young, buyer for Video Isle, a small Seattle chain. " 'Bhaji on the Beach' is not about an Indian woman with large breasts."

"The story is about a multi-generational conflict, of which sexual activity is core to the story," says Culberg of Columbia TriStar.

But Young says the box art misleads customers into expecting a sexy movie.

"What happens is people who would normally rent it are put off, and people who do rent it get pissed off," she says.

Any time customers try to rent the movie at her stores, Young gives them fair warning: "I tell them, 'You do know what the movie's about, don't you?' "

The Torrance-based Video Choice chain has a similar policy, says General Manager Bob McConnell. "We tell our people to be real truthful," he says. If customers expect a different type of movie than they see, "not only does it turn them against a particular movie, it turns them against the store."

Clearly, it's up to the renter to exercise caution. One common land mine is the big tease: Sex sells, so it should come as no surprise that video distributors play up the T&A. But that can be a disservice to the film.

Marketed as a "Showgirls"-esque skin-fest, the 1995 Miramax film "Exotica" turns out to be much more than another stripper movie.

"Picture Bride," another Miramax release from last year, takes a quasi-documentary look at a young Japanese woman sent to Hawaii to marry a countryman she has never seen. With a naked woman in the foreground and a couple embracing under a waterfall in the back, the box art makes it look sexy, but it's not.

