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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer and raconteur
Posted: January 22, 2011 06:24 PM

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DVDs: *Downton Abbey* Frothy Fun



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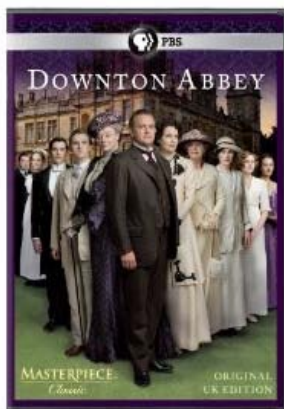
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After 40 years, the creators of the landmark TV series *Upstairs, Downstairs* announced they'd be relaunching the series this spring... only to see Julian Fellowes launch this upstart version (\$34.99; PBS) clearly modeled on their show. Needless to say, they were miffed. But no one owns a copyright on stories about the aristocracy and their servants. Fellowes had mined that territory brilliantly with his screenplay for *Gosford Park*, Robert Altman's final masterpiece. It seemed fresh because he mixed in a murder mystery.

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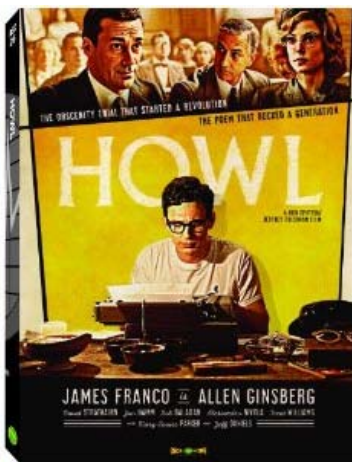
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Here, there is no mixing. This is pure *Upstairs, Downstairs* territory -- in fact, during the first episode so many plot twists echoed major turns in that 1970s classic (the Titanic, closeted gays, fondness between the top man and woman overseeing the servants) that it was almost funny. Those echoes continue right through the season finale (not to mention a storyline lifted wholesale from the classic WW II film *Mrs. Miniver*).

But by then *Downton Abbey* had found its own voice -- thanks mainly to seeing this world through the eyes of a middle class man and his mother who are thrust into this milieu due to an unexpected inheritance. The plot twists are just that -- twists meant to keep us watching -- rather than the dramatic developments of a genuinely great show. But it is definitely great fun and the cast is jaw-droppingly good. Jim Carter is a delight as the sober head butler and Brendan Coyle oozes decency as the wounded veteran who desperately needs a job. The always-wonderful Penelope Wilton is the mother of the new heir and a woman who insists on being "useful," much to the chagrin of her upper crust relatives. I could go on and on, listing virtually every cast member but climaxing with Maggie Smith, a shameless scene stealer every time she walks into a room as Violet Crawley, Dowager Duchess of Grantham.

The series was a smash hit in the UK so there will be a season 2 (and 3 and 4, I'm certain). Hopefully Fellowes will calm down and savor his characters more than his plot twists. He's already created a fun show. But with a cast like this and success guaranteed, there's no reason not to shoot for greatness.



HOWL (\$29.98; Oscilloscope) -- Allen Ginsberg must be rolling in his grave -- with delight. Who wouldn't want to be played by James Franco in a movie about their most famous poem and the censorship battle that made it a bestseller? Ginsberg never looked like this in real life. Heck, even Neal Cassady -- the siren of the Beats -- never looked as good as James Franco. The actor holds the screen very nicely in *127 Hours* (when that movie isn't desperate to jazz up the story of a man trapped in a dangerous spot). Similarly, *Howl* is worried about presenting a poem at the heart of its film so we hear Franco reciting it in a Ginsbergian manner, we see grainy black and white footage of Ginsberg reading it to an audience for the first time, we watch animated imaginings of the action of the poem and we examine it legally as the poem is dissected in a trial where the good lawyer is played by Jon Hamm and the bad lawyer who thinks it is vulgar is embodied by a hapless David Strathairn. If it sounds like a lot is going on, it shouldn't. The film is inert dramatically, with the cardboard villains of the trial (a mousy Mary Louise Parker and a smarmy Jeff Daniels) never leaving any doubt what the judge will decide. The rest is just smoke and mirrors as they dole out sections of the poem piece by piece. The film should have been a documentary -- and made 20 or 30 years ago, ideally, so they could capture more people when they were alive. A fictional film, no matter how inventive and jazz-like it may be, hasn't done the job. DVD extras are more compelling, including interviews done with Ginsberg friends, a 1995 performance by Ginsberg doing "Howl" at the Knitting Factory, Franco reading it himself and more. Oddly, they don't include the one extra I expected: a fully animated version of "Howl" that would piece together all the sections that were glimpsed in the film. So many people loved the animation that it's a shame they didn't finish the job.

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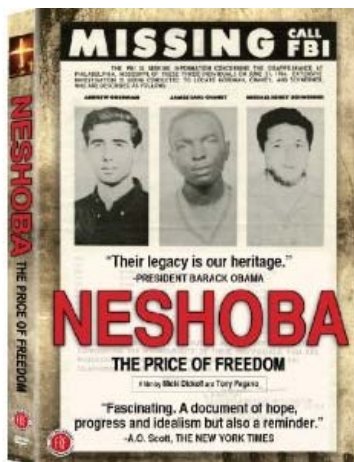
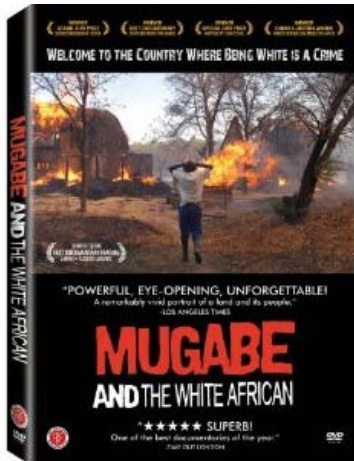
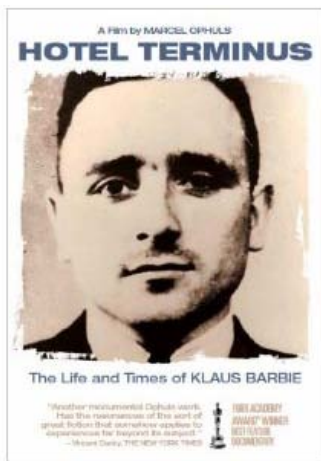


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HOTEL TERMINUS (\$34.98; Icarus)

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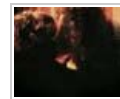


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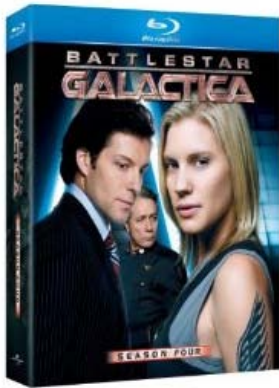
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MUGABE AND THE WHITE AFRICAN (\$27.95; First Run)

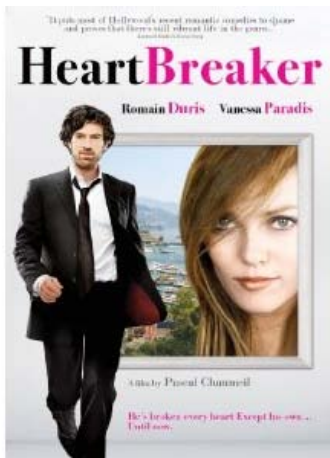
NESHOBA: THE PRICE OF FREEDOM (\$27.95; First Run)

EICHMANN (\$24.98; E One) -- Race looms large over these three documentaries and one docu-drama.

Hotel Terminus is a four and a half hour epic that would be the crowing achievement for most filmmakers. But it's more like a throat-clearing for Marcel Ophuls after his devastating, even longer *The Sorrow and the Pity*. Here he relentlessly charts the path of Nazi war criminal Klaus Barbie from his atrocities during the war through his cooperation with and protection by the US to his safe haven in Bolivia where French lawyers finally tracked him down and brought him to justice. The Oscar winner for Best Documentary in 1988 and no wonder. *Mugabe and the White African* is an odder duck. It charts the international courtroom battle of Mike Campbell, a white farmer who bought land AFTER the dictator Robert Mugabe seized power in Zimbabwe/Rhodesia. Campbell took Mugabe to international court to defend his farm -- making this a head-spinning example of justice and a good companion piece to anyone who enjoyed Claire Denis's current arthouse hit *White Material*. Justice was delayed in the Mississippi Burning case, when Chaney and Schwerner and Goodman were killed. But 40 years after one of the most famous acts of homicide during the Civil Rights era, mastermind Edgar Ray Killen was finally indicted. The story is interesting, though the film covers the familiar territory in a familiar way enlivened a bit only by getting Killen to talk to them. Courtroom footage makes for good bonus material but the complete Killen interview would have seemed a no-brainer. Finally, *Eichmann* attempts to dramatize the life of another war criminal, Adolf Eichmann, the man who engineered the Final Solution. Mostly it boils down to Eichmann crossing swords with an Israeli police officer amidst many flashbacks. No wonder the others made documentaries; sometimes fiction can seem only a pale reflection of reality.



BATTLESTAR GALACTICA SEASON FOUR (\$89.98 on BluRay; Universal) -- BG looks more and more impressive as we step back from its run and look at the series as a whole. The final season was wholly satisfying and naturally it looks smashing on BluRay. I envy the people who get to watch the entire show from miniseries through four seasons and TV movie bridges all at once. This set comes loaded with all the usual extras plus BluRay exclusives like a look at scoring the series finale, more deleted scenes, online trivia challenges (what the frak? I failed?) and more. Very few TV series can end at the right time and on their own terms. This one did.



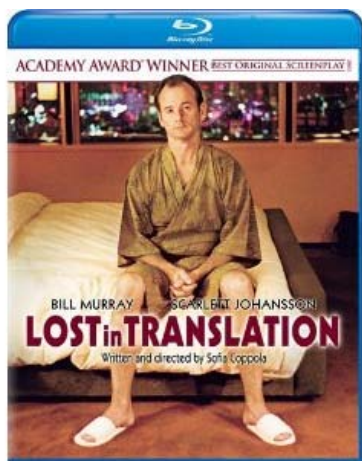
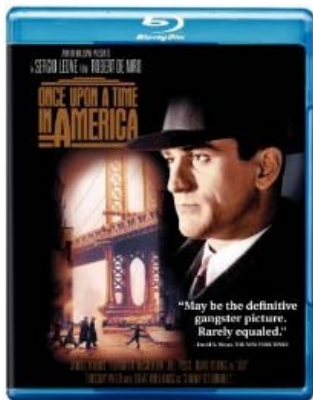
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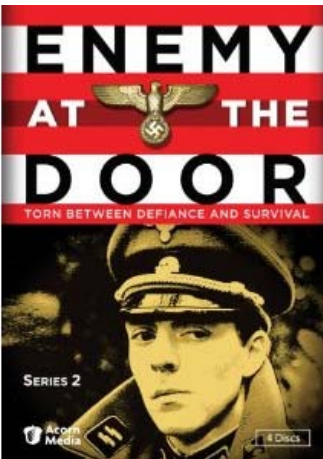
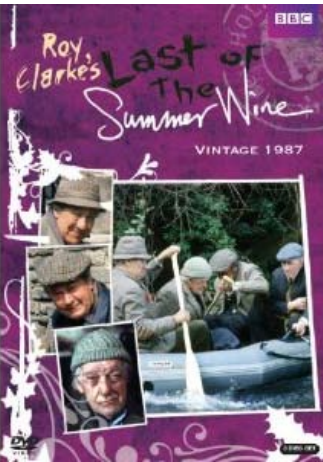
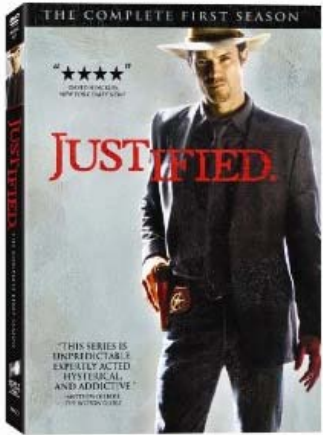
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HEARTBREAKER (\$24.98; IFC) -- The premise of this French romantic comedy is so high concept and commercial I imagine the Hollywood remake was being shot even before this version hit theaters. Romain Duris is a romancer-for-hire, paid lavish sums by families and friends to woo away a daughter/sister/friend before she commits to a loser that everyone can see is a disaster in the making. Duris of course wins her heart and then walks away. Even the tagline works: "He's broken every heart except his own...until now." What? You mean he's going to actually fall for one of the gorgeous women he's asked to seduce? I don't believe it! Yes, the film is Hollywood down to its core, including predictability. There is one very amusing scene where Duris practices dance moves copied from *Dirty Dancing* (the favorite film of the girl he's assigned to win). Hollywood should keep that scene and work hard on improving the rest.



ONCE UPON A TIME IN AMERICA (\$24.98 BluRay; Warner Bros.)

LOST IN TRANSLATION (\$26.98; Universal) -- I remember seeing director Sergio Leone's gangster epic with my friend Lisa back in high school... and being thoroughly confused. It was quite a while before I discovered that the American distributor had slashed about an hour and a half from the film and turned it into a nonsensical mess. I'll still rank his westerns higher, but in its restored version of 229 minutes, this is a mature, compelling work featuring Robert De Niro, Elizabeth McGovern (currently in *Downton Abbey*), Joe Pesci and a manic James Woods. A must-see for anyone who loves gangster films and period epics. *Lost In Translation* was overpraised but it's a good film with two very nice performances and for that director Sofia Coppola deserves full credit. This BluRay is nothing special, but then the movie wasn't visually flashy in the first place. And no, even with improved sound you still can't hear what he's saying at the end.

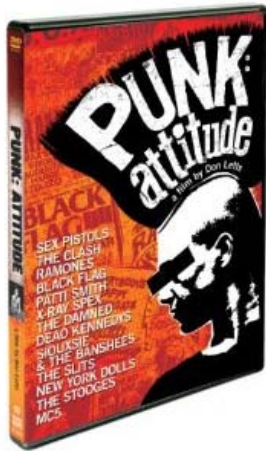


BIG LOVE SEASON FOUR (\$59.99; HBO)

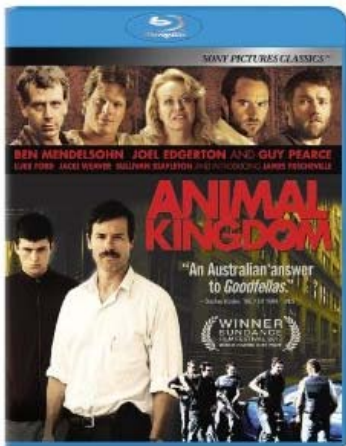
JUSTIFIED FIRST SEASON (\$39.95; Sony)

LAST OF THE SUMMER WINE VINTAGE 1987 (\$34.98; BBC)

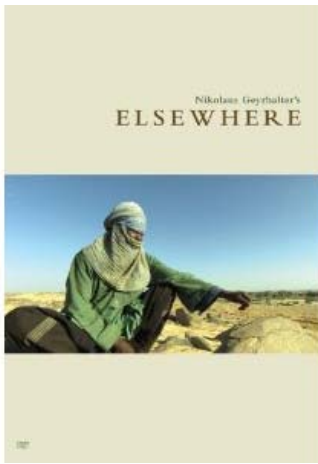
ENEMY AT THE DOOR SEASON 2 (\$59.99; Acorn) -- The HBO polygamy drama *Big Love* seems to be fading out, rather than building to the big finale that a show with such critical acclaim deserves. Perhaps like me you've just been waiting for the DVDs to catch up with the series that will surely be at the top of Bill Paxton's resume for the rest of his life. *Justified* has a lot going for it, namely the zing of Elmore Leonard's original creation and the sturdy presence of Timothy Olyphant. He continues to grow as an actor (and a star, which isn't exactly or always the same thing) and this series seemed to improve a bit as the season went on. A good fix for those who need a modern western. If you ever need a fix of senior citizen sitcoms and *Golden Girls* just doesn't do it for you anymore, there's always the UK show *Last Of The Summer Wine*. It's the longest running sitcom in world history and focuses on retired old men who shuffle around and get into jams. Harmless, sweet, but I feel like they'll be releasing DVDs of the various seasons (this one is from 1987) for the rest of my life. Of course, a boxed set of the entire run to date might just crush someone to death. And I was so gutted over the unexpected cancellation of *Island At War* (whose creator died), that I've been relieved and guilty over discovering *Enemy at the Door*, an earlier UK series with the same setting: British subjects living in the Nazi-occupied Channel Islands during WW II. Good fun, but I do feel like I'm cheating a bit.



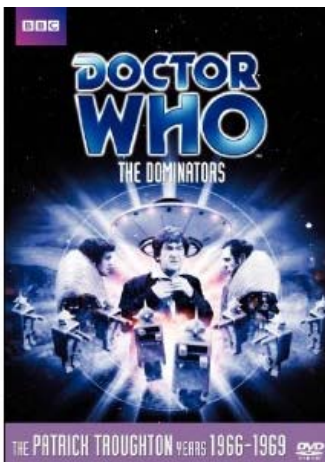
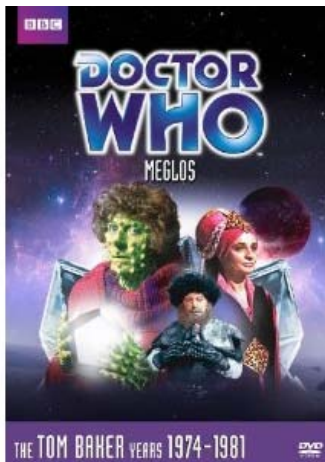
PUNK: ATTITUDE (\$19.93; Shout) -- Another sterling reissue from Shout, this 2005 Don Letts film about the punk movement covers the obvious bases (the Ramones, Sex Pistols, Black Flag, etc.) with seriousness and thoroughness. Sure, it could be twice as long but this is well-done, with a standout interview from Henry Rollins anchoring the history. This two disc set has loads of extras, including in-depth looks at the US versus the UK, women in punk, fanzines and more. Essential for fans.



ANIMAL KINGDOM (\$34.95 BluRay or \$28.95 regular DVD; Sony) -- A brutal, critically acclaimed Aussie gangster pic where the cops are just as dirty as the criminals, *Animal Kingdom* is essential viewing for Oscar buffs. Why? Because Jacki Weaver is a likely contender for best supporting actress for her lacerating portrayal of a mother that makes Medea seem like a Sunday school teacher. (If Melissa Leo and Amy Adams split the vote for *The Fighter*, she might just triumph this time around.)



ELSEWHERE (\$29.98; Icarus) -- This is definitely a case of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts. Director Nikolaus Geyrhalter took an HD camera and headed...everywhere. He spent one month per location and went to 12 places on five continents, capturing ways of life that can take your breath away. He spends 20 minutes of film time on each place, so the rhythm is established early in this four hour movie. It's a bit much to see all at once, especially since each individual segment is rarely eye-opening or insightful in any particular way. But the overall effect is notable: all of this is going on in our world, right now. People in the rainforest wearing next to nothing, Finnish men keeping an eye on their reindeer and so on. From the desert to ice floes to the jungle, ultimately you're just struck by the diversity of human existence and a bit of envy that the filmmakers got to experience it all. Some images are beautiful but by and large it's workmanlike and rightly so: here we are, it says. Pretty amazing, isn't it?



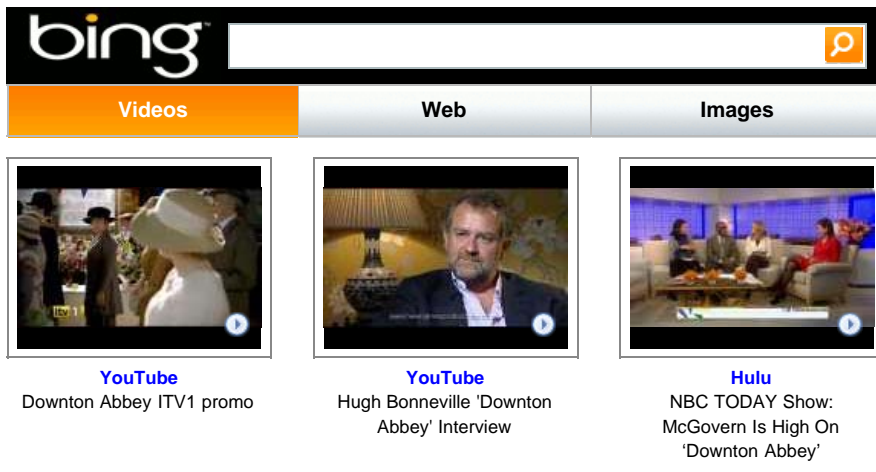
DOCTOR WHO: MEGLOS / DOCTOR WHO: THE DOMINATORS (\$24.98 each; BBC) -- 47 years, countless episodes and still they dole out Doctor Who from the past like it's a scarce commodity. I grew up with Tom Baker's Doctor but even I can't say much for "Meglos," a so-so storyline towards the end of his run. I don't really know Patrick Troughton's run from 1966-1969, but "The Dominators" is a bit livelier. Both complete storylines come with some very respectable extras. And yet someday -- surely, someday -- they'll do it right and come out with complete boxed sets for each Doctor. I mean, it has been

20 or 30 or 40 years; they've had enough time to prepare. Still, start that theme song up and I'm sucked right back in.

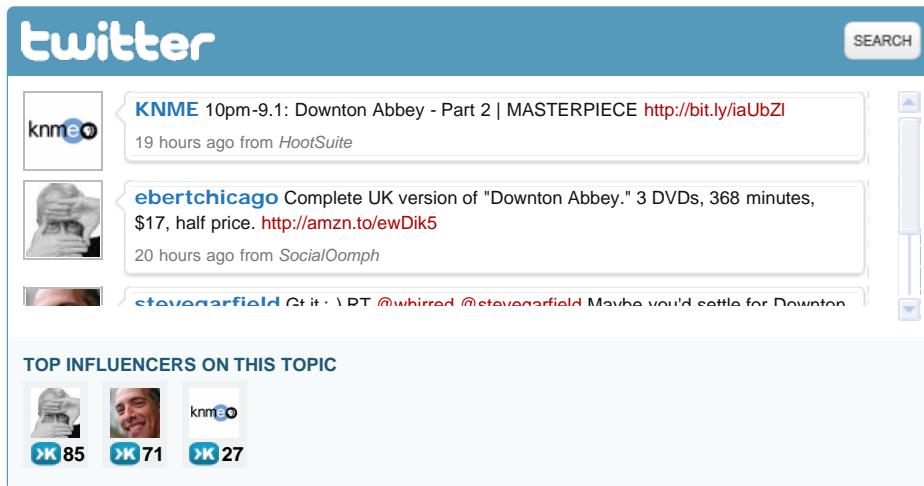
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NOTE: Michael Giltz is provided with free copies of DVDs to consider for review. He typically does not guarantee coverage and invariably receives far more screeners and DVDs than he can cover each week. Also, Michael Giltz freelances as a writer of DVD copy (the text that appears on the back of DVDs) for some titles released by IFC and other subsidiaries of MPI. It helps pay the rent, but does not obligate him in any way to speak positively or negatively of their titles.

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The screenshot shows the Bing search engine interface. At the top is the Bing logo and a search bar. Below the search bar are three tabs: 'Videos', 'Web', and 'Images'. The 'Videos' tab is selected and highlighted in orange. Below the tabs are three video thumbnails. The first thumbnail is from YouTube and shows a scene from 'Downton Abbey' with the caption 'Downton Abbey ITV1 promo'. The second thumbnail is also from YouTube and shows Hugh Bonneville with the caption 'Hugh Bonneville 'Downton Abbey' Interview'. The third thumbnail is from Hulu and shows a scene from the 'NBC TODAY Show' with the caption 'NBC TODAY Show: McGovern Is High On 'Downton Abbey''.



The screenshot shows a Twitter search results page for 'Downton Abbey'. The Twitter logo is at the top left, and a search bar is at the top right. Below the search bar are three tweets. The first tweet is from KNME, posted 19 hours ago, with the text '10pm-9.1: Downton Abbey - Part 2 | MASTERPIECE' and a link 'http://bit.ly/iaUbZI'. The second tweet is from ebertchicago, posted 20 hours ago, with the text 'Complete UK version of "Downton Abbey." 3 DVDs, 368 minutes, \$17, half price.' and a link 'http://amzn.to/ewDik5'. The third tweet is from stevegarfield, posted 20 hours ago, with the text 'Get it... PT @whirred @stevegarfield Maybe you'd settle for Downton'. Below the tweets is a section titled 'TOP INFLUENCERS ON THIS TOPIC' with three profiles: a profile with 85 followers, a profile with 71 followers, and a profile with 27 followers.

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Downton Abbey is absolutely the best thing on PBS since the new Sherlock! I can't wait to view each new episode, as the plot twists are so interesting and the acting is superb. Amazing!

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