

DVDs: Film School or Criterion? You Decide

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Every once in a while, a great director or screenwriter will offer up a list of their favorite films. Martin Scorsese just did it, sort of. (Actually, [he gave an interview and talked at length or briefly or just referenced 89 films](#), which was immediately turned into *The 89 Films Martin Scorsese Says Every Filmmaker Needs To See!*) It's fun. You see the list, you check off the ones you've seen, make a note of the ones you haven't and scoff at a few you wouldn't include yourself. (Though of course Marty surely has some insightful reason for every film on the list -- like maybe an innovative production design or great camerawork as opposed to, you know, the movie as a movie.)

I actually prefer [Scorsese's list of 39 international films everyone should watch](#); it seems less haphazard. And [Akira Kurosawa had a pretty great list of 100 classics](#) that his daughter made available to the world.

So people display the lists, name the directors like Paul Thomas Anderson and Quentin Tarantino and countless others who never went to film school or quit and basically educated themselves on VHS or laser disc or DVD by watching the movies referenced by their favorite directors. As they say, you could do worse.... Mind you, I'm almost certain it would be useful to learn practical stuff like how a camera works and the different lenses and Avid and so on. Actually that's a good argument for learning everything from craft services to acting if you want to direct (just like every reporter should start in copy or fact checking).

But forget ALL of that. Forget film school. Forget lists by favorite directors. Forget reference books like *The 136 Films You Should See Before You Die*. If you really want a great and eclectic film education, go to [the School Of Criterion](#). Sure, the benefit of a quirky list by Scorsese is precisely that it's quirky. Anyone can make [a list of 100 movies most people would agree are classics](#). So you want some personality, some oddballs to give your education spark. Criterion has that: most of their movies are classics. But they also dig into the nooks and crannies of cinema. They champion current directors. They reveal some passion projects. And literally everything released by Criterion is worth a look. (Except for *The Rock*. That was a mistake, but they could use the money and it became their best-selling release ever, so shame on us. And at least it IS the best movie associated with director Michael Bay.) But it gets better: Criterion releases often get released with commentary tracks, making-of features, brief celebrations of the film by admirers -- which is like having a major director come in and share what they love about a film before your class screens it -- and more. It's truly an education about each particular film. Yes, they've released hundreds and hundreds of titles by now. So to be clear that we're not cheating, [start with the first one hundred](#), from *Grand Illusion* to a compilation of Beastie Boys videos and you'll see what an awesome education it would be. Then watch the next one hundred. And then the next one hundred after that.

And when you're ready for your post-graduate level work, dive into the Eclipse series.

SILENT OZU: THREE CRIME DRAMAS (\$44.95 DVD; Criterion's Eclipse)

Eclipse is the "no frills" line of releases by Criterion. What they lack in bonus features, they make up for in eclecticism. The prints are always of a solid quality and the range of offbeat, fascinating and downright revelatory movies that are included have me more excited for the latest releases from Eclipse than from Criterion itself. I'm thrilled to get great new BluRay editions of classic films like *The Thin Blue Line* and recent movies like *Moonrise Kingdom*. But Eclipse takes me to school in the best sense of the word.

Here are three early films from Yasujiro Ozu, one of the greats. If you're like me, you know Ozu as a master of quiet, contemplative family dramas. Now his earlier work is getting a better hearing in the West and we're discovering gems like *I Was Born, But...* and now three gangster-ish movies. How can you not get excited by *That Night's Wife*, a noir all set during one fateful evening; seeing Kinuyo Tanaka of *The Life Of Oharu* get fiercely jealous over her gangster boyfriend's new female pal in *Dragnet Girl* (awesome title!); and watching an everyman forced to commit a brutal crime in *Walk Cheerfully*? School is in session, the prints look solid and I've never been happier to have homework.

THE BABADOOK (\$29.99 BluRay; Scream! Factory)

THE MISSING (\$54.99 BluRay; Anchor Bay)

Nothing is scarier than a threat to your child. Two new works -- a horror film and a miniseries -- explore that terror from different angles. *The Babadook* is more a work of suspense than a full-on horror film. Don't look for maniacal blood-letting from this one. The horror starts within as a single mother and her son struggle to make a life for themselves. You keep swinging in your sympathies and your suspicion: first the mother seems like she's losing it and perhaps mentally unhinged; then the little boy seems disturbed. It kicks into high gear when a mysterious picture book about *The Babadook* appears on their doorstep. Don't read it! Indeed, don't read any creepy picture books that appear mysteriously; it's just good advice. As the mom, Essie Davis gives a very good performance and the project overall is an impressive calling card for director Jennifer Kent. I look forward to what she does next.

The Missing is very different. It's a UK miniseries about a family torn apart by the disappearance of their son. A supernatural demon would actually be welcome to them; at least, they could name the terror and fight it. All they have is an absence, an absence that tears apart their family and haunts everyone, including the police involved with the case. A clever structure makes this drama especially compelling. It takes place over eight episodes and this is a genuine miniseries, with a beginning and middle and end.

COOLEY HIGH (\$29.95 BluRay; Olive Films)

I don't think *Cooley High* is on any of Martin Scorsese's lists of notable films. but Quentin Tarantino would be smart enough to include it on one of his lists, not to mention rattle off facts about the making of the film or detail the careers various actors went on to have that would enlighten me. Churned out by the exploitation label AIP in 1975, it was clearly an attempt to cash in on the success of *American Graffiti* by creating an all-black version. Set in Chicago in 1964, *Cooley High* is episodic and sweet and sad and -- though it was probably the last thing on AIP's mind -- a gem. Screenwriter Eric Monte went on to help launch the TV shows *Good Times* and *What's Happening!!* (nominally a spin-off of the film). Director Michael Schulz did *Car Wash* and *Greased Lightning* and god help us the Bee Gees movie *Sergeant Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band* (plus a lot of TV). This is the one they'll all want to be remembered by.

THE STEPHEN SONDHEIM COLLECTION (\$129.98 DVD; Image)

Every season on Broadway, the highest compliment a new show can get is to be compared to composer Stephen Sondheim's work. Just check out the reviews for *Fun Home*! Classics are rethought in his honor as well. *The King And I*, critics say, is revealed to be complex and a worthy precursor to Sondheim. (Needless to say, Sondheim would extoll the greatness of Rodgers & Hammerstein before anyone else could beat him to it.) Off Broadway, a stripped down and acclaimed new production of *Into The Woods* just received some end of the season nominations for top awards while the feature film version just became one of the highest grossing musicals in North American history. *Gypsy* just opened in London starring Imelda Staunton to such raves I'm thinking of selling a kidney so I can fly over and check it out.

In other words, anyone who loves Sondheim can't get enough of him. So buy them this: it's a six disc collection of six stage productions filmed for TV, concert productions and a birthday celebration. You get the legendary

performances of Mandy Patinkin and Bernadette Peters in Sunday In The Park With George from 1986. You get the recent 2011 edition of Company with Neil Patrick Harris and Stephen Colbert. I'll take the 1990 Into The Woods capturing of that show over the feature film any day. Like most people (that's the nature of theater), I didn't get to see Patti Lupone and George tackle Sweeney Todd, so the 2001 concert with the San Francisco Symphony is a treat. (Sometimes, cast albums aren't enough.) Toss in the all-star performance of Follies from 1985 that may be the show's ideal version and a tribute to the composer with countless legends, such as Elaine Stritch doing "I'm Still Here" and you've got yourself a whole lot of Sondheim. It's not enough. It never is. But it's a start.

JAG: THE COMPLETE SERIES (\$119.99 DVD; CBS TV?Paramount)

The TV drama JAG haunts the dreams of every TV executive. Whenever they pull the plug on a TV show, some little part of them hesitates and wonders with fear if someone else will pick the show up. Will it win Emmys? Will it hang on long enough somewhere else -- maybe in first run syndication -- to be considered a hit? Will canceling it make them look bad? One has to pity the poor fools at NBC who kicked JAG to the curb. It was a solid performer but decidedly uncool and NBC was still very cool in 1995: it was airing Frasier, NewsRadio, Friends, Seinfeld, ER and Homicide: Life On The Streets. It had Law & Order as a durable programmer and that one at least got good reviews. No one paid attention to JAG. It ranked 79th and NBC cancelled it and CBS picked it up, probably thinking the show might provide some good filler come mid-season when the inevitable holes appeared in its schedule.

So CBS picked it up and the show found a home on Friday night. Critics still ignored it (think Tom Selleck's Blue Bloods, also a big hit on Friday night now). But it grew and grew and became a massive hit around the world, airing for ten seasons and producing 227 episodes that made everyone a LOT of money. As if that weren't bad enough, it spun off NCIS, which became the #1 show on primetime and spun off NCIS: Los Angeles and NCIS: New Orleans and counting. Dumping JAG was literally one of the biggest and most expensive blunders in TV history. So don't give this boxed set as a gift to any executives at NBC. It's the sort of show that doesn't really need to be seen in order (which is why it was so successful in syndication). But for fans -- and JAG has many -- this compact, less expensive boxed set is not as fancy as the original collection put out in 2005 but it's a lot more affordable. And JAG was always a meat and potatoes show anyway.

ANTARCTICA: A YEAR ON ICE (\$34.95 BluRay; Music Box)

THE RIVER (\$39.95 BluRay; Criterion)

Sometimes you just want to wallow in beauty and both these films offer that, to say the least. Antarctica is a documentary film about life at the bottom of the world. You'll like it more if you haven't already seen director Werner Herzog's typically quirky project Encounters At The End Of The World, which covers the same territory in a more quixotic, offbeat manner. This one has a fair amount of humor as well, not to mention some stunning images. Similarly, Jean Renoir's first film after World War II and his awkward time in Hollywood is a visual stunner. It tells a simple tale about life on the river for three young women in India who all fall hard for a handsome soldier now home minus a leg and his self-confidence. Renoir captures an entire world with this gorgeous film, a paean to man and nature that looks particularly stunning on BluRay. Typically, Criterion pulled this print from an excellent 2004 restoration and includes extras like a one hour documentary, comments from Renoir and even comments from Martin Scorsese (again!). I can't wait for the restored Satyajit Ray Apu trilogy to open up in May. The River is the perfect movie to tide me over until then.

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