



THE BLOG

# DVDs: "Spotlight" And "Trumbo" Hit Homes Just In Time For Oscar; Plus Carol Burnett, Bond and More

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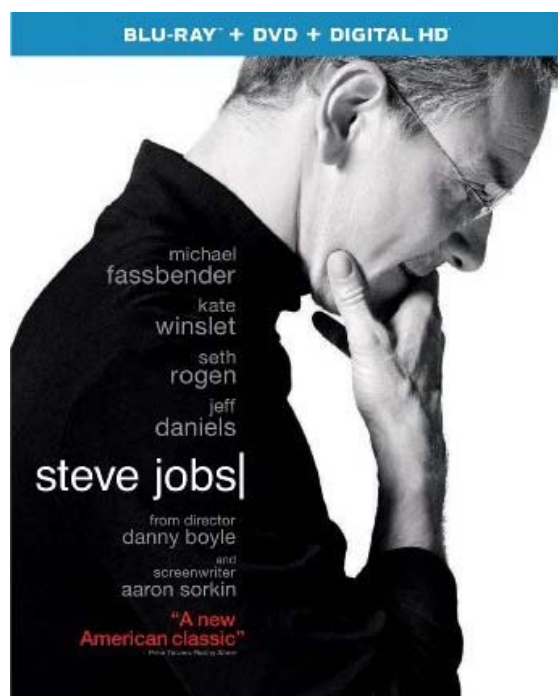


Michael Giltz

Freelance writer

Once upon a time, movies dreaming of Oscar glory would time their release in movie theaters to peak with the Oscar nominations or even the Academy Awards itself. Time it right and a wave of nominations could boost your box office. Winning Best Picture? That might send you into orbit. We're in a different world now and smart movies now time their release onto BluRay and DVD and streaming sites and on-demand outlets with an eye cocked towards award season. Here are some of the hopefuls whose names you might hear come Monday night, as well as a host of other releases.





**SPOTLIGHT** (\$34.98 BluRay; Universal)

**TRUMBO** (\$34.98 BluRay; Universal)

**STEVE JOBS** (\$34.98 BluRay; Universal)

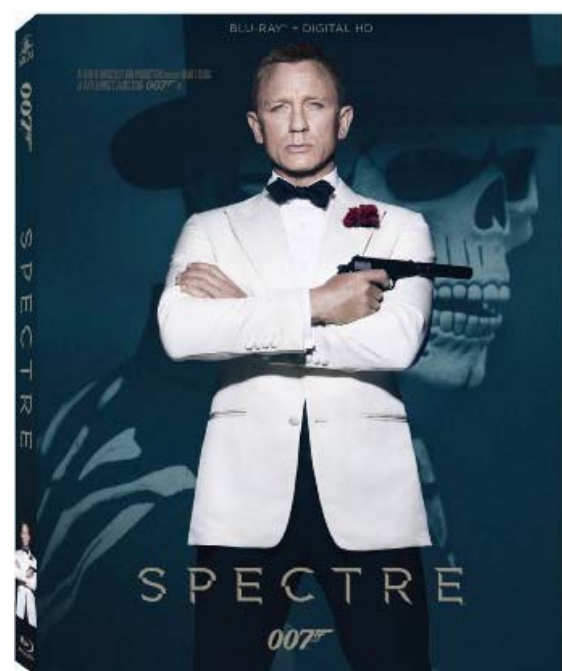
*All The President's Men*. Yes, it's impossible to talk about *Spotlight* without giving a shout-out to the film it is clearly and lovingly modeled on. *All The President's Men* is a better film, but so what? *All The President's Men* is better than most films, including all the Oscar nominees this year for Best Picture. So that's no insult. Here's what is different: *ATPM* was recounting a shameful moment in American history the entire country was transfixed by. *Spotlight*, like the best investigative journalism, is recounting a shameful pattern of criminal behavior in the Catholic Church that stretched decades

and countries, yet is ignored or at best painfully acknowledged but immediately shunted aside by most people. A stellar cast makes this catnip for fans of journalism, a lost art that may never return again, now that there are no journalism jobs left. And it's no insult to them to say that the emotional/intellectual sucker punch that stays with you is not a performance or particular monologue but the brutal scroll at the end of the movie detailing crime after crime, allegation after allegation, fact after fact and lives ruined one by one. It's a pity Pope Francis won't watch it.

*Spotlight* celebrates good old fashioned pounding the pavement type journalism.

*Trumbo* celebrates old fashioned movie making, to a fault. It's hard not to think that actor Bryan Cranston made this an awards favorite simply based on momentum alone. Coming on the heels of *Breaking Bad* (one of the best TV shows of all time) and his Broadway triumph in *All The Way* playing LBJ, here he embodied the iconoclastic rebel screenwriter Dalton Trumbo. I'm all for movies making a hero out of writers. But Trumbo himself would have probably crafted something more daring than this. Still, you get Cranston in fine, scenery-chewing form and a host of great actors like Helen Mirren in smaller parts. There are worse ways to pass the time.

Sometimes a movie seems like such Oscar bait you resent it in advance. Certainly Steve Jobs has such a fine pedigree one can't help feeling a bit ruffled by the expectation you're supposed to admire it. Oscar winner Danny Boyle directs! Oscar winner Aaron Sorkin wrote the script! The biography by Walter Isaacson was hugely acclaimed and hugely best-selling. But before you get your dander up, Sorkin actually devised a smart frame for the film that focuses on Apple product launches to show Jobs at his showiest to the world and most under pressure behind the scenes. Michael Fassbender and Kate Winslet star and even if you think you're not interested, you will be if you watch.





**SPECTRE** (\$39.99 BluRay; Fox)

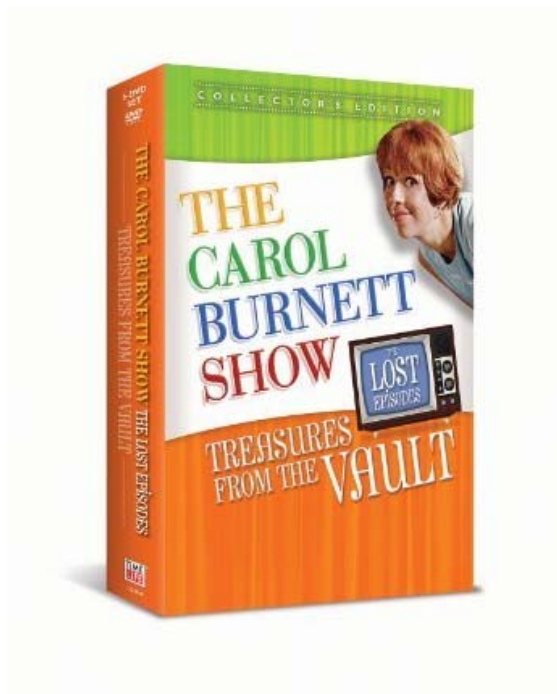
**SPIES** (\$29.95 BluRay; Kino Lorber)

**WOMAN IN THE MOON** (\$29.95 BluRay; Kino Lorber)

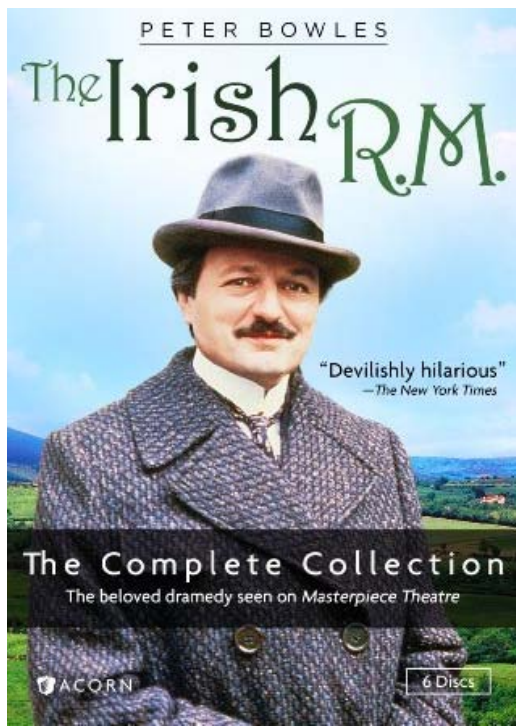
Maybe *Skyfall* was *too* successful? James Bond experienced a bit of a backlash on *Spectre*, if you can call the second-highest grossing Bond film in history (without adjusting for inflation) as having suffered a backlash. (It grossed \$240 million less than *Skyfall* but about \$280 million *more* than any other Bond flick.) Anyway, I haven't a clue as to what anyone would complain about. It's a Bond film! You've got good women (happily, more fully developed characters played by better actors now), a theme song (the worst in years; sorry Sam), a villain, a lair, explosions, chases, killings, elaborate action scenes and so on. You were expecting Shakespeare? I for one was precisely in

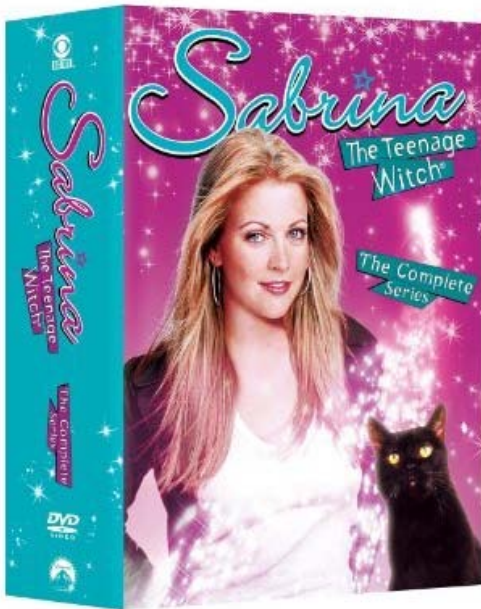
the mood for a Bond film and that's exactly what I got.

Now why is a Bond movie followed by two silent films by acclaimed director Fritz Lang? Shouldn't *Spies* and *Woman In the Moon* be included in a round-up of arty fare and foreign movies? Heck, no. Until he was rehabilitated by the French, Lang was known as a "hack" director of popular flicks; think Howard Hawks. Never mind M is no one's idea of a popcorn movie -- Lang was popular in his day and thus not important. So yes he's a major director. But *Spies* is major fun, a three hour tale of espionage, secret Russian agents, turncoats betraying their country for money and others betraying their country for love. It's a blast. *Woman In The Moon* is a little creakier in the melodrama. But it's still fun and a very early stab at serious-minded science fiction. Indeed, the movie was so accurate in its depiction of rocketry's future that this 1929 film was banned by the Nazis because it struck too closely to the goals of their secret V-2 program. *Moon* is more of a curio but *Spies* is an absolute treat and both are presented with care.









**THE CAROL BURNETT SHOW: TREASURES FROM THE VAULT** (\$59.95 DVD; Time-Life/WEA)

**TOUCHED BY AN ANGEL: THE COMPLETE SERIES** (\$129.98 DVD; CBS DVD/Paramount)

**THE IRISH R.M. COMPLETE COLLECTION** (\$59.99 DVD; Acorn Media)

**SABRINA THE TEENAGE WITCH: THE COMPLETE SERIES** (\$59.98 DVD; CBS DVD/Paramount)

**THE ANDY GRIFFITH SHOW: THE COMPLETE SERIES** (\$84.98 DVD; CBS DVD/Paramount)

Five different collections of TV ideal for family viewing, if that's not too quaint a conceit in a world where mom is in the den working on her summation for the next day's trial while DVRing Orange Is The Black while dad is in the kitchen making dinner based on

an old PBS DVD from Julia Childs and the kids are in their bedrooms consuming YouTube stars their folks have never heard of before.

I grew up watching Carol Burnett, but not the episodes collected in *Treasures*. These haven't really been seen since they first aired. This new set contains 15 complete uncut episodes with four hours of welcome extras. Those who saw them first will feel waves of nostalgia. For most, like me, it's like seeing baby pictures of people you know so well but never really thought about what they were like before you met. It's a grab bag with some episodes from season one, others from two and three and so on, but it's all genial fun as Burnett finds the skits and style that would make her name.

*Touched By An Angel* is much more recent but it feels like a relic of a particular 1990s TV show. You get all nine seasons, a cavalcade of guest stars and a whole lot of wholesome messages. Given the extraordinary success star Roma Downey and her husband have enjoyed in recent years with faith-based material, it's no surprise to see this mainstay return in an inexpensive package their fans will surely embrace. It hasn't really aged well, but their fans won't care.

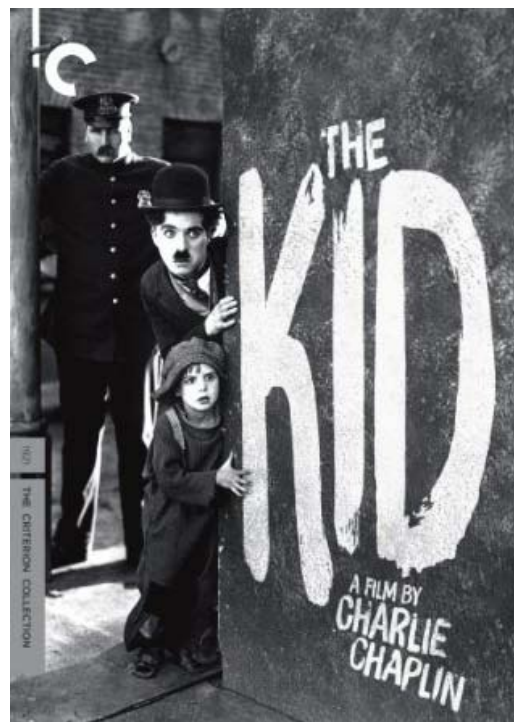
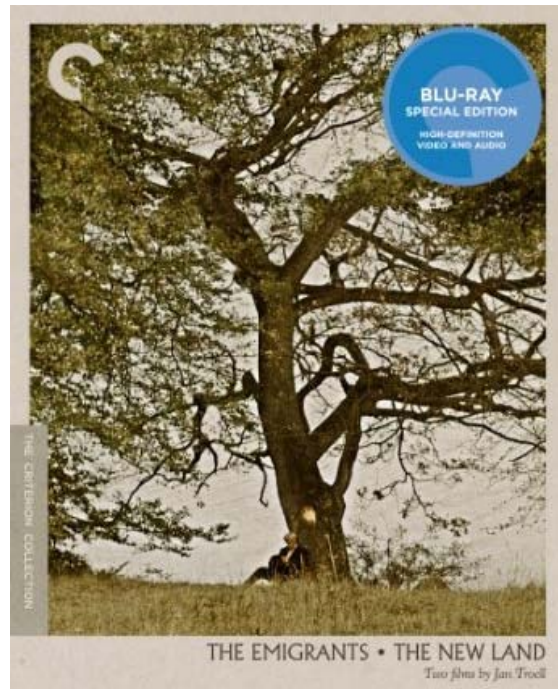
Actor Peter Bowles looms large in the imagination of American fans of British TV. He appeared in *Rumpole of the Bailey* (a classic crime drama). He starred in the hugely popular *To The Manor Born* (an enduring sitcom that will be always be first in his credits). And here he starred in the genial period show *The Irish R.M.* Ignore the politics of the British man lording it over the Irish, which is easy to do since they hoodwink him time and again. See it as a colonial fantasy with touches of whimsy and you can appreciate the innocent charms of the series (based on a series of books from 1899 to 1915) and the easy charisma of Bowles. Still, it's no wonder the books dried up as the rebellion caught fire. You get all three seasons, eighteen episodes in all AND the blessed inclusion of subtitles. Subtitles should be standard in absolutely everything (just ask Stevie Wonder) but they're especially welcome in TV shows that don't have the most spectacular audio and boast actors with thick accents.

Melissa Joan Hart gave a sense of fun to the travails of a teenage witch, which apparently had less to do with spells and more to do with which boy to share your life with. (Harvey, duh!) *Sabrina The Teenage Witch* ran for seven seasons with Hart just about the only constant, other than her talking cat. Yes, it was that kind of show. But thank goodness studios are emptying their vaults or at least repackaging their shows in less fancy but less expensive boxed sets. You get all seven seasons for less than \$8 a season!

But of all the family friendly entertainment listed above, none can touch *The Andy Griffith Show*. It demonstrates that family friendly doesn't have to mean dumbed down or treacly. It's a classic by any standard and deservedly so. Me, I could do with a tad less Barney Fife, but that's me. Griffith himself is the usual center of a sitcom storm, the straight man to an array of friendly kooks and oddballs. But he's also a charming storyteller with a twinkle in his eye. Instead of just offering a set-up for someone else's punchline, he's got his own jokes to tell. That's just one reason why this paean to



small-town life that never really existed is so appealing. It belongs on anyone's shortlist of the best TV shows of all time.





**THE EMIGRANTS/THE NEW LAND** (\$49.95 BluRay; Criterion)

**THE KID** (\$29.95 DVD; Criterion)

**THE TAVIANI BROTHERS COLLECTION** (\$49.98 BluRay; Cohen Media Group)

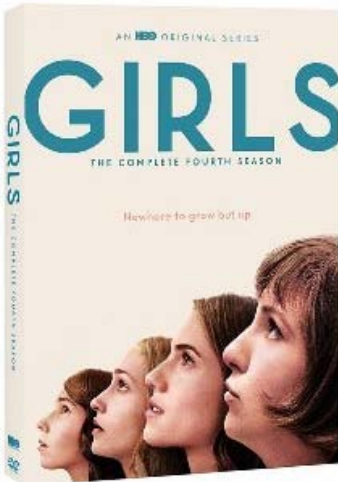
Director Jan Troell is overshadowed by Ingmar Bergman, as probably every Swedish director will be for decades to come. Yet one simple reason is that his masterpiece -- the one-two punch of *The Emigrants* and its direct sequel *The New Land* -- simply hasn't been seen much. Here it is presented by Criterion with consummate care. This alone should send them barreling back up the lists of critics when compiling their all-time favorites. If quality isn't enough, the story of Swedish immigrants making a new life in Minnesota is a timely reminder of how people risking their all to come to America is both the defining story of the country and the key reason for its greatness. It's hard to exaggerate the impact these two movies had: the first was nominated for Best Foreign Film and the following year (given quirky Oscar rules) it was nominated for four more Oscars including Best Picture and Director. Max Von Sydow and Liv Ullmann starred, giving indelible performances. The success didn't stop there: it was turned into a TV show for ABC starring Bonnie Bedelia and Kurt Russell. Despite rave reviews, it faced the buzzsaw success of both *All In The Family* and *Emergency* and was cancelled after just six episodes. Now THAT'S a show I'd love to see on DVD. Criterion presents them both with care, including an intro by critic John Simon and the usual thoughtful extras.

As for silent directors, tracking the status of their popularity is trickier than early polling in a wide open Presidential election. Charlie Chaplin once reigned supreme, with no one else even on the radar, except for the pesky Buster Keaton. Since everyone knew Keaton's *The General* was his masterpiece, it started to outpace the three or four Chaplin gems that split his vote. Then Harold Lloyd came into vogue. Then people realized Keaton had a lot more great films than *The General*. Then Fatty Arbuckle found his adherents and the shorts of Laurel & Hardy found their adherents and others said the shorts of Chaplin wiped the floor of everyone else. Let's face it: a lot of great

comedy was produced in the silent era. Case in point: Chaplin's 52 minute breakthrough *The Kid*. It was the Tramp's first full length movie and like Disney's gamble on *Snow White*, it was a massive success. It also made a star of Jackie Coogan. And it's just plain fun. Criterion offers it with some great extras but the movie itself is endlessly appealing. And that sends you back to *The Gold Rush* and *City Lights* and the debate starts all over again.

Certainly the Italian duo The Taviani Brothers need some attention as well. They became international sensations but eventually faded from the world spotlight. That was until 2012's *Caesar Must Die* put them back on the map. Now we've got this trio of movies on BluRay: their breakthrough *Padre Padrone*, their masterpiece *The Night Of The Shooting Stars* and *Kaos*. Pauline Kael in particular gave *Shooting Stars* the rave to end all raves, the sort that makes filmmakers think maybe critics aren't so bad after all.





**THE LEFTOVERS SEASON TWO** (\$44.96 BluRay; HBO)

**GIRLS SEASON 4** (\$29.99 DVD; HBO)

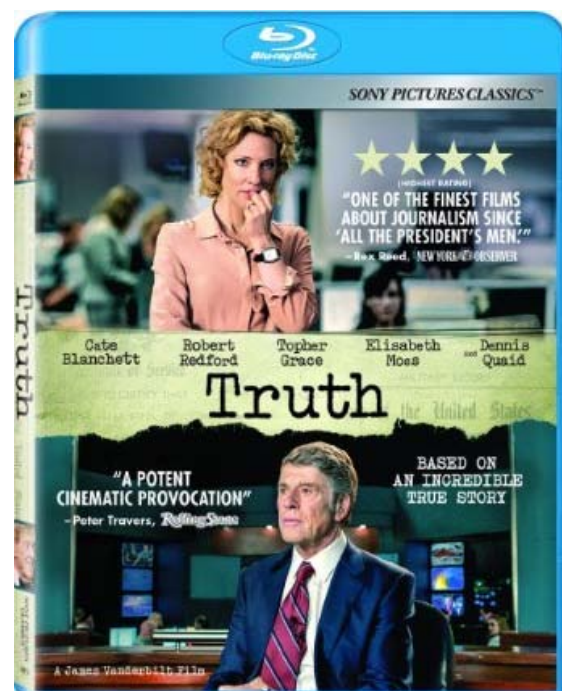
**FARGO YEAR TWO** (\$49.99 BluRay; Fox)

Well that worked! *The Leftovers* had a first season that left people scratching their heads over this show about life on earth post-Rapture. (Or post-something, at least.) What exactly were the show's creators up to? Did they even know themselves? Season Two deftly rebooted the series with a bold change that made season one seem better, delivered more completely on the promise of the show and garnered a review for a third season. Mind you, the third season will be its last, but for a show with a limited premise

like this (you really wouldn't want to stretch out this idea for ten seasons, would you?) that's actually a good thing. Now they have a clear finish line and with no real pressure other than the artistic, they're free to make exactly the show they want. Season Two sparked enough critical acclaim to make this an excellent time to catch up or join in for what could be a solid ending.

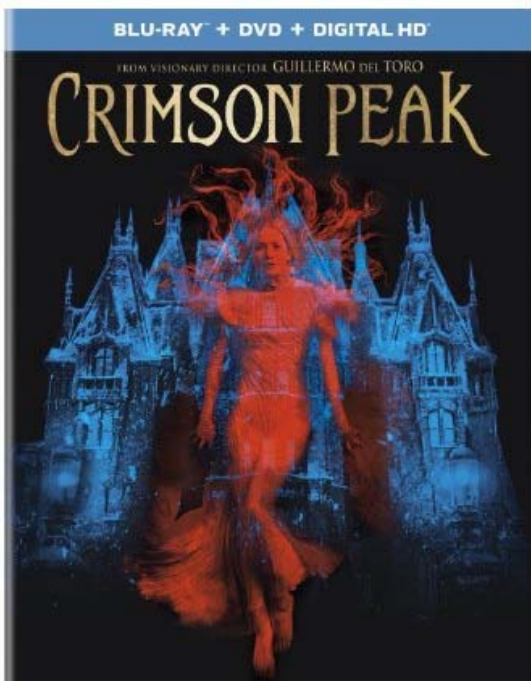
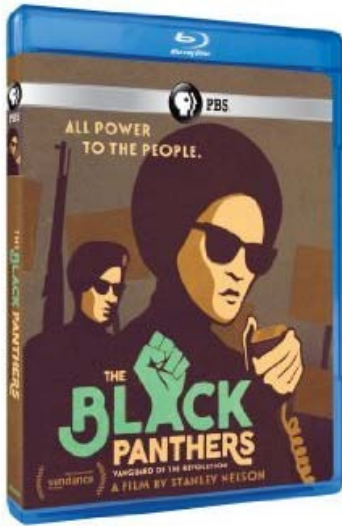
*Girls* by Lena Dunham is in the same boat. The fifth season has just begun and the sixth will be the show's finale so she too can map out exactly how she wants the series to end. Both "shocking" and far more conventional underneath the surface than one might expect, *Girls* has always been pretty divisive for viewers while critics have generally been kinder. It's not a show that benefits from binge-watching, however. So buy the set for proudly displaying and watch it in real time. Or show some restraint and watch an episode, discuss it with your fellow watchers and return in a week or two to watch another. Pile them on top of each other and the pleasures it can offer will dim. Otherwise zip through three or four episodes and you'll feel exhausted by watching them try to top themselves in daring once too often.

All three shows have their fans, but *Fargo* has the purest record of quality. Season one was hugely praised. Season two was pronounced even better. Self-contained tales set in the offbeat universe of the Coen Brothers movie, *Fargo* struck me as a particularly odd choice to turn into a TV series. Thank god it wasn't for a major network. We would have spent five seasons locked in with the quirky charmer created by Frances McDormand and by the end all the strange bits would have been smoothed out. Here you get complete and satisfying tales delivered by a great cast of actors and with no need to stretch out their stories to reach the magic 100 episodes for syndication that used to terrorize anyone trying to create art. The list of great TV shows you need to catch up with seems to grow by leaps and bounds. Here's one more.









BLU-RAY™ + DVD + DIGITAL HD



**TRUTH** (\$34.99 BluRay; Sony)

**99 HOMES** (\$26.99 DVD; Broad Green Pictures)

**BLACK MASS** (\$35.99 BluRay; Warner Bros.)

**THE BLACK PANTHERS: VANGUARD OF THE REVOLUTION** (\$29.99 BluRay; PBS)

**CRIMSON PEAK** (\$34.98 BluRay; Universal)

**THE GOOD DINOSAUR** (\$39.99 BluRay; Walt Disney)

We began with a string of movies hoping to win one or more Academy Award come Monday night's ceremony. Now we end with movies that were Oscar hopefuls but didn't pan out. Not to fear: since the Oscars almost never choose the actual best film of the year as the best film of the year, these films are in good company.

*Truth* thought it would be the journalism film of the year, a penetrating look at the 60 Minutes story investigating the military record of George W. Bush that blew up in the face of Dan Rather, the TV show and its lead producer. Instead, *Spotlight* became the cause du jour for people who love journalism and its touting of the cause du jour. Perhaps the bitterest pill for the people involved in the story *Truth* focuses on is that their missteps allowed others to cast doubt on the significant evidence of Bush's actual backsliding on his commitment to the National Guard. The movie struggles to capture all this without glorifying or demonizing the real people involved. (Other than Bush; they don't mind doing that really.) It's more about corporate politics and infighting under pressure at a major network than the politics of Bush. And that's just not as sexy as speaking truth to power.

Michael Shannon is an exceptional actor. But we'll have to wait for the breakthrough movie that will put him on the radar of a wider audience. Maybe if director Ramin Bahrani's biggest fan Roger Ebert were around to keep attention focused on this well reviewed indie, it would have found more traction with Oscar voters. As it is, *99 Homes*

remains another piece in the puzzle about the economic meltdown and its effect on real people. Pair it with *The Big Short*.

Johnny Depp certainly made *Black Mass* solely with the intent of making a good movie. Yet surely it was somewhere in the back of his mind that after years of commercial ups and downs but critical indifference he might return to the quality movies he's so clearly capable of delivering, at least once in a while. But this look at a crime lord proved too familiar to make an impression, even though Depp himself did remind everyone how good he can be. Unfortunately, since then he's made another *Pirates*, another *Alice In Wonderland*, an animated spin on Sherlock Holmes and signed on to a reboot of *The Invisible Man*. Sigh. Maybe we should have given him an Oscar nomination.

Finally, an Oscar hopeful we can tout with certainty. *The Black Panthers: Vanguard Of The Revolution* is the first feature length look at the Black Panthers, which is a little surprising actually. Directed by Stanley Nelson, it played in theaters and then aired on the PBS series *Independent Lens*, the home of so much that is good in the documentary world. The Oscars certainly blew it when not including this on the short list of the best documentaries of the year. Since they overlooked the highest grossing musical in North American history when passing by *Straight Outta Compton*, they might have saved themselves at least a little embarrassment by recognizing this film's achievement. But as with *Compton*, the black heroes here are not passively noble or slaves literally in chains: they're real, complex, complicated, and determined to make change happen. Huey Newton, Eldridge Cleaver and the rest: their names still resonate and this film tells the story of the group they launched.

*Crimson Peak* an Oscar hopeful? Absolutely. Not as a Best Picture contender, unless the planets aligned. But this film from Guillermo del Toro is a very old-fashioned horror film, more haunted house than gore fest. In fact, it's old-fashioned enough to lead some fanatically narrow-minded horror fans to insist it's not a "real" horror film. It didn't help that del Toro himself downplayed what should have been its happy membership in that genre, albeit on the classy respectable side of the street. Still, with his visual flair and a top-notch production team, if *Crimson Peak* had clicked commercially and with critics, it could have expected to score in key technical categories. As it is, they should now be begging for people to think of it as a horror film. It won't be discovered on DVD -- it falls through the cracks both artistically and spookily -- but is damn impressive looking at times.

Finally, there's *The Good Dinosaur*, a rare Pixar film to not achieve both commercial success and critical acclaim. Still, it's rare for Pixar to put out even a short that doesn't get nominated for an Oscar. Of course, *Inside Out* will win the golden statue. But what do people watching this movie get? Well, they get a film that's certainly better than an actual misfire like *Cars*. Fans of animation will surely appreciate some truly lovely widescreen imagery of the American West that is a throwback to the panoramas of classic Hollywood movies, a rare achievement for cartoons. The story of a boy and his dinosaur won't wow, but the visuals will and it's harmless family fun, though modestly

too intense for very young children. Among the extras, you get "Sanjay's Super Team," the Pixar short about a boy daydreaming of superheroes when asked to join his father in prayer. Yeah, it's nominated for an Oscar and might just win. Other extras separate the film's alternate history where an asteroid avoided earth and thus dinosaurs weren't wiped out with scientific facts. But animation buffs will especially appreciate glimpses of the earlier stabs at the story that were tried and discarded during the movie's torturous production history.

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**Note:** Michael Giltz is provided with free copies of DVDs and Blu-rays with the understanding that he would be considering them for review. Generally, he does not guarantee to review and he receives far more titles than he can cover.

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## CONVERSATIONS