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DVDs: Japanese Noir? Hai!



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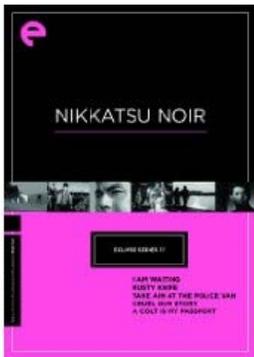
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Criterion is a peerless company when it comes to preserving and presenting classic films. But don't be surprised if some day they're remembered even more for the relative obscurities unearthed and presented on their "budget" Eclipse line, in which great films without the name recognition of *The Seventh Seal* or *The Bicycle Thief* are offered up with a great print, but few to no extras.

New York's Film Forum just ended its highly popular event, British Noir, which played to packed houses. But I just had my own festival with *Eclipse Series 17: Nikkatsu Noir* (\$69.98; Criterion Eclipse), which includes five films from Nikkatsu, the Japanese studio that specialized in their own style of noir, the way Warner Bros. was known for gangster flicks. What an entertaining eye-opener. They are in order:



I Am Waiting (1957) -- a real gem, with a one-time boxer saving a canary (that's girl singer, in noir speak) from possible suicide while he waits for word from his brother in Brazil. The magnetic Yujiro Ishihara is the boxer and he's teamed here with his frequent costar Mie Kitahara. Classic tough guy with bottled up feelings meets broad who can out-cold him when it comes to her despair. They can't all be this great, can they, I wondered?

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Rusty Knife (1958) -- Yujiro Ishihara again (known as Yu-Chan to his fans) tries to go straight but the cops want him to fess up to witnessing a murder years ago of a major politician. Guess whose daughter he's developing the hots for, by the way? Solid entertainment.

Take Aim At The Police Van (1960) -- The weakest of the bunch, relatively speaking, but still enjoyable fun. This shows a prison guard suspended from his job after the van he's riding in is attacked and prisoners are killed or wounded. He investigates and stumbles onto plots within plots, not to mention a crime lord-ess who is handy with a bow and arrow and may be going soft for him. So many twists I grew a tad cynical, but fun.

Cruel Gun Story (1964) -- The boxed set heads right back to greatness with this despairing tale of Joe Sishido as apparently the only gangster with a code of ethics. He takes a job of knocking off an armored car only to see the men he works with and the mobsters he works for all try and betray one another at every turn. I assumed Sishido -- who has a puffed-up face that looks like he's eternally recovering from a beating -- was an unlikely leading man because of his odd looks, much as I enjoyed his cool. In fact, he reportedly had surgery to attain this weird look because he thought his normal features held him back. And it worked! Bleak, bleak film that I'm sure Tarantino name-checked when it came to *Reservoir Dogs*.

A Colt Is My Passport (1967) -- A stone cold classic and a crazy mix of gangster flicks and a western, courtesy of some windswept plains for a showdown and a spaghetti western score straight out of Leone. Joe Sishido again, as an assassin who does his job, only to have his employers betray him yet again, sending him on the run and into the arms of a waitress who had given up on love. All the movies feature some splendid camera work but this one is especially rich in evocative touches, like the shot of the moll driving a truck at night, her face floating in the windshield along with the wheel, as if her isolation weren't clear enough already.

Any fan of noir or just pure entertainment from around the world should check this out. I was so swept away by the set, I didn't have time to re-watch much of Jacques Tati's charmingly old-fashioned *Playtime* (\$39.98 on BluRay), which looks smashing and still amuses for the first reel or Chantal Akerman's formally rigorous look at a day in the life of a widow, *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce 1080 Bruxelles* (\$39.98; Criterion). The latter film moves at such a steady pace it makes *My Dinner With Andre* look like *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*. In a playful mood, apparently, Criterion is holding a contest for the best cooking video as an homage to a scene in the film in which the heroine prepares a meal, step by step. [The rules can be found here](#). Read them while you get a flavor for the film:

Also out now:

THE RIVALS OF SHERLOCK HOLMES (\$59.99; Acorn) -- What an ambitious TV series. This 13 episode corker for fans of Brit mysteries was a 1971 response to the popularity of Sherlock Holmes. Instead of the umpteenth spin on the great detective, it packaged together mysteries popular in the England of Doyle featuring *other* detectives in the nascent genre, ie. the "rivals" of Holmes. The practical result is that they cast and produced what amounted to 10 pilots for ten different detective shows. And quite a few of them are very compelling indeed. The show ran two seasons and this set contains season one, which includes two mysteries for some of the heroes.



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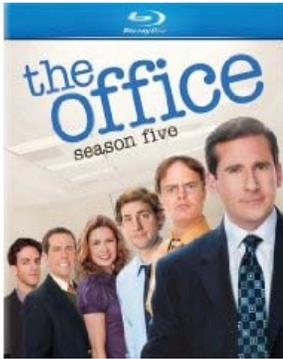
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John Neville is compellingly vain as the autopsy specialist Dr. Thorndyke, Robert Stephens is fun as a blind aristocrat, and so on. The sets are rather stagey and the supporting roles (this is Thames TV and not the BBC) a bit broad at times (especially on the atypical ghost story anchored by a fine Donald Pleasance). And Peter Vaughan took two episodes before I appreciated his grasping, mercenary detective. But all in all, a good deal of fun.

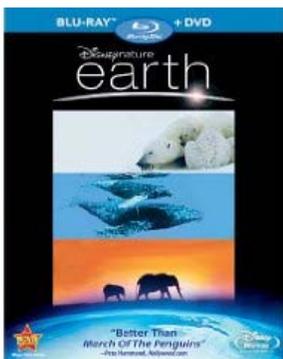


THE OFFICE SEASON FIVE (\$59.98 regular or \$69.98 on BluRay; Universal) -- Remaking the UK version of *The Office* remains a terrible, terrible idea. It just so happens that in doing so (and after a season of painfully aping the original), they found their own voice and created a similar, but more heartfelt series that is very very good. This season is strong to me as ever, though fans seem to rank it slightly below the last few. The roast of Steve Carell was hilarious, Idris Elba of *The Wire* was inspired casting and Amy Ryan has done exceptional work. Dwight going off on his own and competing successfully with Dunder Mifflin? Also funny. Unlike most sitcoms, this one needs to be watched in order so DVD is definitely the way to go. The BluRay looks great and for a change is only a tad more expensive.

GAUMONT TREASURES 1897-1913 (\$79.95; Kino) -- Another excellent survey of early cinema that is sure to rank among the best reissues of the year. I've never read a good look at early Hollywood and the role of women. Specifically, I've often wondered how they dominated writing and editing and even directed quite a bit but got shunted to the side as Hollywood's importance increased. One such pioneer was Alice Guy, represented here with more than 60 shorts, including "Wonderful Absinthe," "Turn Of The Century Surgery," and the half hour film "The Birth, the Life and the Death Of Christ." Fans of Guy or the curious should be certain to head to New York City and the French Institute Alliance Francais in partnership with the Whitney when **they screen some of her shorts with original live music** by four female composers inspired by her work on September 29. The other two discs, which I've skimmed over, include 13 shorts by cliffhanger specialist Louis Feuillade and two full-length films by Leonce Perret.

THE BEIDERBECKE TAPES (\$39.99; Acorn) -- A sequel to *The Beiderbecke Affair*, but equally forced zaniness with two retired schoolteachers indulging in their love for sleuthing. Harmless, but unmemorable.

BURNING THE FUTURE: COAL IN AMERICA (\$26.95; Dcurama) -- A strangely beautiful film that takes a cold-eyed look at the destructive nature of that very 19th century fuel source, coal. Smart, but when even a banal speech by the President to schoolchildren urging them to do their homework can be distorted into a controversy, it's hard to see this opening up many minds.



DISNEY NATURE EARTH (\$29.99 regular or \$39.99 BluRay) -- I can't recommend highly enough the absolutely stunning, gorgeous to look at TV documentary series *Blue Planet* and *Planet Earth*. Both are by the same team, which took footage from the hugely popular *Planet Earth* and gave it a new score and narration so it could be seen in movie theaters where the jaw-dropping

scenes they captured on film were even more spectacular. I wonder if Disney has a ride devoted to footage from this film a la *This Is Cinerama*? They should do so, immediately. If you had a chance to see this in the theater, I'd say go right ahead. I've never been much into nature documentaries; their work turned me into one. But if we're talking about what to watch in your home, there is no reason to take this edited version of highlights over the two series already available to you. You couldn't possibly be disappointed if you watched them. If you really are afraid to commit, I suppose this is a good teaser to give you a taste of what to expect. The BluRay looks stunning, of course and is one of those DVDs you'll always keep on hand when you want to wow guests.

SUGAR (\$28.96; Sony) -- A genuinely independent film, this quiet drama from the creators of *Half Nelson* follows a Dominican player as he joins the farm system of a major league baseball team. When it sticks to quotidian details (like the players ordering the same thing day after day at the local diner because they don't know English), the movie is good. It loses its way when our player goes from simply hoping to make it into the majors to a potential top prospect, which is a very different story. Steroids and an unexpected left turn derail the film even further until its focus returns to the man at the heart of it just in time for the finale. If it had jettisoned the dramatic twists, this could have been a very focused, revealing look at culture shock and what it's like for these players when they come to America. Worthy and well-intentioned, which is a backhanded compliment for a not-bad film.

And here's a quick glance at a crush of TV and other releases:

Martini Movies (\$19.94 each; Sony) - five oddball films of variable quality are lumped together as "Martini Movies." Who cares as long as they're out? Movies include Michael Douglas's Vietnam film *Summertime*, Jacques Demy's *Model Shop*, Timothy Bottoms in *Love and Pain and the Whole Damn Thing*, *The Pursuit of Happiness* and *The Buttercup Chain*. No, I hadn't heard of most of them either.

Fringe First Season (\$59.98 regular or \$79.98 on BluRay) -- I stopped watching and friends immediately insisted it got a lot better. Sigh. I'll try again.

Valentino: The Last Emperor (\$29.99 or \$34.99 on BluRay; Phase 4) -- a well-reviewed documentary about the acclaimed designer who may or may not be the last of his kind but is certainly memorable. More than 40 minutes of extras.

Two And A Half Men Season Six (\$44.98; Warner Bros.) -- Six years in a cuddly comedy and Charlie Sheen still seems dangerous. Good for him.

Brothers and Sisters Third Season and **Desperate Housewives Fifth Season** (\$59.99 each; ABC) -- *B&S* is a little better than you expect (thank you, talented cast), while *DH* is just as bad as you feared. Over the top satire and soapy twists only work for so long. (*Arrested Development* should be glad it was canceled after three years. There was nowhere left to go, creatively.)

Doctor Who: Image of the Fendahl and **The Deadly Assassin** (\$24.98 each; BBC) -- Drip, drip, drip. They slowly squeeze every penny out of Doctor Who fans with their dribbling out of episodes and movies. They don't get more important than *The Deadly Assassin*, a high water mark for Tom Baker. But still. One mammoth boxed set per doctor. Smaller boxed sets for each full season. Is that so hard?

Rescue Me Season Five Volume One (\$49.95; Sony) -- Denis Leary's criminally underappreciated TV show (he must get sick of that: just watch the damn thing, he'd growl) gets the dreaded Season 5 Volume One treatment, as if any fan anywhere in the world would want half a season of anything.

Goosebumps: The Headless Ghost and **Attack Of The Jack O'Lanterns** (\$14.98 each; Fox/Scholastic) -- Dependable chills for kids in the ever-popular Goosebumps series. Three tales per DVD.

Important Things With Demetri Martin Season One (\$19.99; Paramount) -- I'm not driven to watch this sketch comedy show grouped around a single theme each episode, but whenever I do I'm dependably amused. Funny guy, even if his film debut *Taking Woodstock* didn't quite catch fire.

The No 1 Ladies Detective Agency Season One (\$59.99; HBO) -- The mysteries are beside the point in this long on charm, short on difficult to solve puzzlers crime show. Grammy winner Jill Scott is delightful as Precious Ramotswe, the keen-eyed observer of human nature from the best-selling series of novels. She's surrounded by a winning cast and it's all buoyed by a good score and just the right gentle tone.

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Good to see Criterion and Japanese noir getting some well-deserved media attention here! Both of Robin's suggestions are fantastic.

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In sort of the same vein, I recommend "The Bad Sleep Well" and "The High and the Low," both by Akira Kurosawa. They are, iirc, even in black and white.

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