



Branded to Kill DVD/Blu-ray (Criterion)

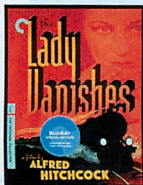
After director Seijun Suzuki was brought in to rewrite and direct the 1967 film *Branded to Kill*, the end result was his firing from the studio for delivering an uncommercial product. Thanks to its eventual renown as a cult favorite and its influence on directors such as Quentin Tarantino and Jim Jarmusch, Suzuki was ultimately vindicated.

As with Suzuki's 1966 effort *Tokyo Drifter*, *Branded to Kill* is a yakuza (Japanese mafia) film. While action abounds, Suzuki's stylized blend of humor and pop art sets it on an utterly different level, at times like surrealist noir. At its center is Goro Hanada (Joe Shishido), the syndicate's creative number-three hit man, who has a fetish for the aroma of boiling rice.

After failing at a seemingly impossible job, Hanada is marked for death, and the resulting chaos plays like a fever dream. Who's the mysterious number-one hit man? And might The Smashing Pumpkins' "Bullet With Butterfly Wings" have been inspired by a botched kill? (www.criterion.com/films/576-branded-to-kill)

7/10

By Hays Davis



The Lady Vanishes DVD/Blu-ray (Criterion)

Alfred Hitchcock's 1938 classic gets heroic treatment from the fine folks at Criterion. One of the last films Hitchcock directed before departing the U.K. for Hollywood, *The Lady Vanishes* finds a magnificent balance between humor and tension. Iris (Margaret Lockwood) is taking the train on her way home from spending the holidays with some friends. She falls asleep. When she awakes, the old woman that had been seated across from her has disappeared, replaced by someone else in the same clothing. As the story unfolds, and Iris finds a partner in Gilbert (Michael Redgrave), she laughs get more and more nervous as Hitchcock tightens the screws. Hitchcock's dry humor has always been underrated, and never has it been in finer, more consistent form than in *The Lady Vanishes*.

Included on the Blu-ray is a spin-off of sorts, *Crook's Tour*, featuring two characters from *The Lady Vanishes*, commentary from film scholar Bruce Eder, a video essay by Leonard Loff and, most enjoyably, some of the interview between Hitchcock and François Truffaut. The respect between these two men gave rise to one of the greatest conversations about film in history, and to hear it is a thrill. (www.criterion.com/films/358-the-lady-vanishes)

8/10

By Jim Scott



Margin Call DVD/Blu-ray (Roadside Attractions)

In the myriad equivocal nomenclatures that accompanied the fiscal analysis of the subprime mortgage meltdown that read like Chinese algebra to the average American, what was largely lost was any sort of humanization of those villainized: the members of the financial sector. *Margin Call*, directed by J.C. Chandor,

seeks to accomplish this Herculean task and, more often than not, rises to the occasion.

The film's moral core lies with Sam Rogers (Kevin Spacey), a veteran executive clearly ambivalent about gaming the system, and Eric Dale (Stanley Tucci), the risk-management analyst who provides the initial tip as to the impending meltdown. Both exude charisma in spades but, like the rest of the fine cast, paint their emotions in muted hues, never overwhelming the story with needless histrionics.

There's also a remarkable degree of verisimilitude throughout, a sense that these largely likable and relatable characters were just doing their jobs, however pernicious the ramifications may have been. It's a cold calculus at play, but *Margin Call's* denouement suggests that this crisis was merely part and parcel of the rigged casino of capitalism, and even those who benefited were just playing along, acutely aware of their ultimate roles as pawns in the game. (www.roadsideattractions.com)

6/10

By John Everhart



Tokyo Drifter DVD/Blu-ray (Criterion)

Early in the 1966 film *Tokyo Drifter*, there's a shot of men in suits, lined up horizontally, walking toward the viewer. It immediately brings *Reservoir Dogs* to mind, and one can picture a young Quentin Tarantino absorbing the movie like a sponge.

Tokyo Drifter's title character is Tetsuya, a former criminal trying to go straight. Some thugs are trying to lure him to their gang, and they'll stop at nothing to achieve their goal.

In one of the DVD's supplements, director Seijun Suzuki says, "I always start by thinking of the style and design of the film. I choose the costume and sets based on that initial image." With its Technicolor palette and comic book set design, it's clear that Suzuki knew exactly how he wanted the film to look.

The film—especially in Criterion's new Blu-ray edition—is visually glorious, and the fact that it's also heartbreaking and action-packed is a bonus. In the supplement, Suzuki waves away the idea of subtlety. "Isn't it more fun if each scene is a different color?" Indeed. (www.criterion.com/films/577-tokyo-drifter)

8/10

By David Brusie



Portlandia



Big Love: The Complete Collection DVD (HBO)

In HBO's magnificent run, *Big Love* was the forgotten middle child. It looked like its siblings; that is, better than most films.

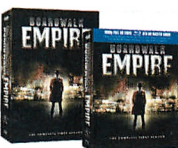
As *The Sopranos* explored the intricacies of Mafioso life, and *The Wire* explored the intricacies of the drug trade, *Big Love* explored the ins and outs of polygamy and Mormonism. By taking on a subject people think they understand, show creators Mark Olsen and Will Scheffer set themselves up with a buzz-worthy premise that the show quickly outran.

As *Big Love* proceeded, Bill Paxton's Bill Henriksen, hardware store owner and state senator, became the focal point of a family drama that eventually encompassed at least four dozen recognizable characters. Though the show could often be funny, it never turned its characters into jokes or cartoons. The plotlines, however, grew more and more exaggerated, starting off with jealousy and credit card debt, and moving on to FBI raids and murder.

Big Love never quite found a groove, despite Paxton's surprisingly sturdy acting. The performances throughout were fine, but none of the principles tore into their roles the way the casts of *The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, or *Six Feet Under* did. Still, creating such a fully-populated world is something to be commended, even if, at times, the viewer's faith was tested as surely as each character's. (www.hbo.com/big-love/index.html)

6/10

By Jim Scott



Boardwalk Empire: The Complete First Season DVD/Blu-ray (HBO)

As with *The Sopranos*, *Boardwalk Empire* takes New Jersey as its

setting, though the latter story begins in Atlantic City in 1920. Steve Buscemi stars as Enoch "Nucky" Thompson, a character based on the Prohibition-era political boss and criminal hipchin Enoch Johnson. In the series' first few episodes, it becomes apparent that Thompson's control over Atlantic City is absolute, and his reach of power extends beyond the city limits.

The series' pilot, directed by Martin Scorsese, was reportedly television's most expensive ever, and strong enough to have worked as a stand-alone piece. As Prohibition gets underway to the demonstrated joy of female anti-drinking advocates, Thompson sees that a network is firmly established to ensure that no paying customers go dry, and the boss of Atlantic City works endlessly to pull the strings on a complex web of political, criminal, and personal activity and upheavals.

Buscemi is at a career high playing Thompson, with any scene he enters being memorable, but the show ultimately succeeds in great debt to a deep and talented cast that includes Michael Kenneth Williams as the unsettling "Chalky"

White. With considerable attention to period detail in its settings, the first season of *Boardwalk Empire* establishes the show with a story deserving of its time to be told.

(www.hbo.com/boardwalk-empire/index.html)

8/10

By Hays Davis



Delocated: The Complete Seasons One & Two DVD (Warner Home Video)

Just when you thought there couldn't be any new ideas for a family comedy, along came *Delocated*. In its 2008 pilot, Jon

(Jon Glaser), who is in the Witness Protection Program, moves his wife and son to New York City to star in their own reality TV show. Forced to wear balaclavas at all times, thanks to Jon's having testified against the Russian mob, the novelty of the reality show wears off quickly for everyone but Jon, and he soon finds himself single.

With Jon often being a wince-inducing jerk (he fully embraces his surgically implanted voice-altering device), the novelty of *Delocated* could easily wear off to its audience as well, but with plots swinging freely from humorously violent to absurd, the well has yet to run dry. Among the solid cast, Eugene Mirman stands out as Yrgen Mirminsky, a Russian hit man and aspiring comedian. (www.adultswim.com/shows/delocated/index.html)

6/10

By Hays Davis



Portlandia Season One DVD/Blu-ray (MVD)

The first episode of *Portlandia* begins with a music video called "Dream of the '90s." The show's creators said the skit was originally scheduled to air in the second episode, but it so well

encapsulated the show's theme that they moved it to the very beginning. As *Portlandia's* co-stars Fred Armisen (*Saturday Night Live*) and Carrie Brownstein (Sleater-Kinney) walk down the street, Armisen sings to Brownstein about a parallel universe called Portland, where "young people go to retire" and "the Bush administration never happened." It's a fitting start to the comedy, a series of short skits that bring back those same quirky characters and Portland landmarks throughout the first season's six episodes.

Some of the skits work better than others. The best scenes include the recurring Women and Women First backdrop, where both Armisen (dressed in drag) and Brownstein play easily offended feminists working in a non-profit bookstore, and the famous "put a bird on it!" skit made popular by YouTube. While poking fun at Portland's hipness (the city's mayor isn't the only one riding a fixed-gear bike, and an obsession for organic chicken takes a turn for the ridiculous), the series becomes more than a spoof of hipsters, thanks to Armisen and Brownstein's comedic chemistry and an excellent slew of guest stars. (www.ifc.com/portlandia)

8/10

By Danielle Sills