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## NEW VIDEO REVIEWS

## TV &amp; Classic Film Reviews

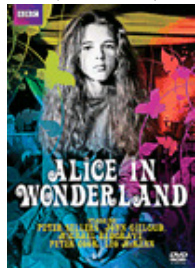
New DVD reviews which do not appear in the print version of Video Librarian.

Rating system: ★ = poor, ★★ = fair, ★★★ = good, ★★★★ = excellent

Updated June 8, 2010

**Alice in Wonderland** ★★★½

BBC, 71 min., not rated, DVD: \$14.98

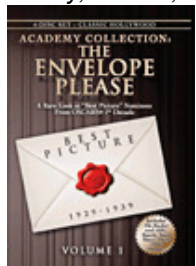


Timed to coincide with the release of the Tim Burton 3-D adaptation, this rarely seen 1966 BBC production from Jonathan Miller takes a radically different approach to the Lewis Carroll classic, reinventing Wonderland as a warped parallel universe to Victorian England rather than a fanciful sphere of gabby animals (only the Cheshire Cat remains on four legs). Here, the story unfolds amid drawing rooms and hallways of genteel shabby mansions, while the novel's zoomorphic characters are portrayed as the Victorians that Carroll was satirizing. Alice herself has also undergone a serious personality change—Anne-Marie Mallik portrays her as a surly observer who greets her bizarre adventures with an air of studied indifference. While much of the original text has been jettisoned to accommodate a tight running time, the surreal style of this eccentric interpretation offers compensation with deep-focus b&w cinematography by Dick Bush and a wonderfully incongruous sitar-heavy score by Ravi Shankar. Amusing star cameos include Leo McKern in drag as the Duchess, John Gielgud dancing at the seashore as the nostalgic Mock Turtle, and Peter Cook as the daffy Mad Hatter, although Peter Sellers is given little to do as the doddering King of Hearts. DVD extras include Cecil Hepworth's 1903 one-reel version of *Alice in Wonderland*, Dennis Potter's 1965 biopic *Alice* (on Alice Liddell, the real-life inspiration for the title character), and a featurette on Shankar's score. Highly recommended. (*P. Hall*)

## Questions &amp; Comments

[vidlib@videolibrarian.com](mailto:vidlib@videolibrarian.com)**Academy Collection: The Envelope Please, Volume 1** ★

Infinity, 4 discs, 780 min., not rated, DVD: \$24.98

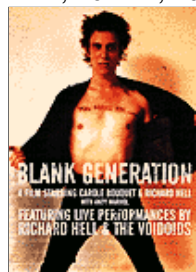


The eight selections on this four-disc set have two things in common: all were Academy Award nominees for Best Picture and all are in the public domain. This collection offers classic cinema at a bargain price, and you get what you pay for—mostly grainy, washed-out editions taken from what appear to be worn 16mm film prints or poor video masters. Lewis Milestone's silent gangster movie *The Racket* (1928) is the rarity here, but this blurry version appears to be many generations removed from the source. The other films are all available in superior editions from companies such as Criterion, Kino, and Image. Roland West's early sound picture *Alibi* (1929) is almost unwatchable; Milestone's *The Front Page* (1931) suffers from a flickering, unstable image; Alexander Korda's *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933) hails from a slightly better but still worn print; Frank Borzage's *A Farewell to Arms* (1932) and William Wellman's early color feature *A Star Is Born* (1937) both sport plenty of surface scratches and soundtrack hiss; and Leo McCarey's *Love Affair* (1939) is unforgivably washed out. In fact, Anthony Asquith's *Pygmalion* (1938) is the only film in the bunch that looks marginally acceptable, but compared to the Criterion edition, it's downright primitive. As a final cinematic insult, every single film has the brand "Hollywood Select Video" burned into the lower right-hand corner of the image like a network logo. DVD extras include a battered collection of trailers from other Academy Award-nominated

features. Not recommended. (S. Axmaker)

### Blank Generation ★★

MVD, 78 min., not rated, DVD: \$14.95



Richard Hell and the Voidoids had one of the great band names of the '70s New York punk scene, while their signature song "Blank Generation" became a classic of its genre. Unfortunately, that title is also the best thing about German director Ulli Lommel's film (shot in 1978 and released two years later), which never comes close to matching the tune's manic energy and appeal. Hell is amateurishly appealing as Billy, a disaffected punk rocker supposedly on the verge of hitting the big time, which is enough to attract Nada (Carole Bouquet), a young French journalist who quickly moves from interviewing him to sleeping with him. Overall, their relationship makes little sense. Nada's beauty is undeniable (within a year Bouquet was James Bond's love interest in *For Your Eyes Only*), but she's also angry, demanding, and flighty as she divides her attentions between Billy and her other lover, a German journalist (played by Lommel) who comes to New York to interview Andy Warhol (predictably cryptic in his one brief scene). In fact, narrative-wise, not much in this disjointed, poorly written, sloppily edited film *does* make sense. The music's good, including several songs by Hell and the Voidoids performed live at the legendary CBGB's in the Bowery, and the film does convey the dark squalor of New York's Lower East Side in the late 1970s. But it's a bad sign when the star notes, quite accurately, that the lengthy recent interview included as a DVD extra "is better than the movie itself." Not a necessary purchase. (S. Graham)

### Dillinger Is Dead ★★1/2

Criterion, 95 min., in Italian w/English subtitles, not rated, DVD: \$29.95



This 1969 film from Italian auteur of excess and decadence Marco Ferreri is an eerie character study—set almost entirely inside a cluttered modern apartment filled with cultural detritus—that focuses on an industrial engineer named Glauco (Michel Piccoli) during one long night. Glauco is like a spirited kid in a life-size toy box, while his gorgeous but emotionally disconnected wife, Ginette (Anita Pallenberg), self-medicates to sleep. Glauco watches home movies, cooks a snack, and has quickie sex with the maid, Sabine (Annie Girardot). But what fascinates him the most is a handgun (which he cleans with olive oil) that ultimately becomes his tool of both domination and liberation in a vicious act of violence. Demanding, confrontational, and purposely alienating, *Dillinger Is Dead* was a radical film in its day, offering a skewed commentary on consumerism and pharmaceutical abuse. But the sexist attitude of entitlement of the (anti)hero leaves an ugly stain on the movie's attempted statement of rebellion. DVD extras include new video interviews with Piccoli and Italian film historian Adriano Aprà (who also has a cameo in the film), excerpts from a 1997 Cannes roundtable with filmmakers Bernardo Bertolucci and Francesco Rosi (among others) paying tribute to Ferreri (who died that year), and a booklet. Optional. (S. Axmaker)

### MysteryQuest: The Complete Season One ★★1/2

History Channel, 3 discs, 470 min., not rated, DVD: \$29.95



The initial 10 episodes of this series debuting in 2009 on the History Channel investigate purported historical mysteries in a style suggestive of supermarket tabloids. Subjects include provocative locales (the Bermuda



Triangle, Stonehenge, Atlantis, Area 51, and an Amityville-like house in California), “new suspects” in unsolved serial murder cases (Jack the Ripper and San Francisco’s Zodiac Killer), and the ever-popular Nazis (one episode questions whether Adolf Hitler might have lived and fled to South America, while another focuses on the so-called Odessa organization that helped high-ranking officials escape to sanctuaries outside Europe). The formula in each case is to combine impressive, high-tech scientific examination with farfetched commentary, cloaking bald speculation in a veneer of objective data. While *MysteryQuest* could be called sensationalistic, the combination of lurid subject matter and serious investigation will still appeal to many, thanks to series’ slick productions, which feature expertly edited collages of archival material, interviews, and ostensibly authoritative exposition. DVD extras include additional footage. Optional. (F. Swietek)

Updated May 25, 2010

### Bigger Than Life ★★★1/2

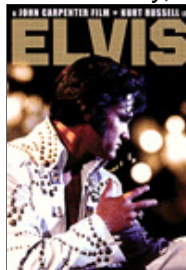
Criterion, 95 min., not rated, DVD or Blu-ray: \$39.95



Ostensibly a drama about prescription drug misuse and abuse, this little-seen 1956 portrait of grade-school teacher and father Ed Avery (James Mason) also offers a pointed social commentary on some of the stresses afflicting middle America in the 1950s. When Avery, who is secretly working a second job to make ends meet, is diagnosed with a life-threatening illness, a new “wonder drug” is all that can save him. Fearing a relapse (and the attendant costs), Avery self-medicates with the experimental drug, triggering psychological side effects that include rampant egotism and arrogance, which also inadvertently uncover his repressed fears and desires. The almost cowering subservience of his wife, Lou (Barbara Rush), is equally revealing of a family distorted by economic and social anxieties that are as relevant today as they were in the mid-20th-century. Director Nicholas Ray creates a powerful visual expression of the central character’s experience—using distorted reflections and monstrous shadows—while directing Mason through a harrowing emotional rollercoaster of a role that ultimately displays a vulnerability that men of that era simply didn’t show. DVD/Blu-ray extras on this Criterion Collection release include audio commentary by movie critic Geoff Andrew, a video appreciation from author Jonathan Lethem, an archival 1977 interview with Ray, a new video interview with Susan Ray (the director’s widow), and a booklet with an essay by B. Kite. Highly recommended. (S. Axmaker)

### Elvis ★★★1/2

Shout! Factory, 170 min., PG, DVD: \$19.99



Kurt Russell is The King in John Carpenter’s 1979 made-for-TV movie, which charts the rise of Elvis Presley from Memphis rockabilly phenomenon to rock ‘n’ roll superstar to his phoenix-like comeback as a Vegas showman. Russell’s effortless impression captures the voice, cadence, and unbridled energy that the young singer unleashed in every performance while allowing us to see the man in the bubble offstage, trapped by the very success that gave him fame and fortune. Carpenter focuses on Elvis’ male relationships and the tricky social dynamic among the friends who became his support group and entourage. Elvis impersonator Ronnie McDowell provides the singing voice, while costars include Shelley Winters as Elvis’ mother, Gladys; Pat Hingle as his manager, Colonel Tom Parker; and Joe Mantegna as his aide and road manager, Joe Esposito. Marking the first collaboration between Carpenter and Russell, this remains the most perceptive of Elvis biopics. Debuting on

DVD in the complete 170-minute version (the film has been unavailable in any format for decades), extras include audio commentary by McDowell and Elvis' cousin/author Edie Hand (who co-authored a handful of Elvis recipe books), the featurette "Bringing a Legend to Life" (featuring archival interviews with Russell and Carpenter), and rare Elvis performance clips from *American Bandstand*. Highly recommended. (S. Axmaker)

### The Fernando Arrabal Collection 2 ★★1/2

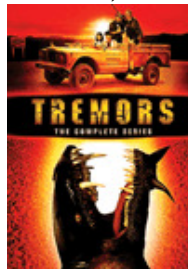
*Cult Epics*, 3 discs, 347 min., in French w/English subtitles, not rated, DVD: \$79.95



This second set from surrealist Spanish writer/director Fernando Arrabal compiles five films on three discs. The first disc features *Car Cemetery* (1983), a post-apocalyptic retelling of the life of Jesus set in an auto junkyard populated by freakishly dressed figures and punk rockers. The second offers *The Emperor of Peru* (1982), a wispy fable celebrating the imagination of children, made in a fashion similar to that of Robert Rodriguez's contemporary family-friendly pictures but on a meager budget. Mickey Rooney stars as a curmudgeonly train engineer who persuades three kids—a boy who dreams of being a hero, his older sister, and a recently arrived Cambodian immigrant—that if they repair a locomotive, it can transport the refugee back home. The last disc contains three offerings: Arrabal's 1992 adaptation of his 1969 novel, *Farewell, Babylon*, largely a monologue by a young woman roaming the streets, illustrated with bits of footage (often involving the gutting of fish) and observations by directors such as Spike Lee and Melvin Van Peebles; the 1998 documentary *Borges: A Life in Poetry*, which juxtaposes excerpts from late Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges' last public statements on art and life with dreamlike montages; and a 2007 documentary on the director himself, *Arrabal, Panik Cineast*, the title highlighting his co-founding of the so-called Panic Movement (referring to the god Pan) with Alejandro Jodorowsky, who's among those here commenting on Arrabal's work. Although Arrabal himself declares "I am cinema" in an interview, one trusts he intended the claim as a joke, since his films are largely oddball footnotes to mainstream cinema history, hardly as influential as the efforts of some other avant-garde filmmakers. Recommended for collections in film history or modern art, this is optional elsewhere. (F. Swietek)

### Tremors: The Complete Series ★★1/2

*Universal*, 3 discs, 557 min., not rated, DVD: \$29.99



*Tremors* began life as a tongue-in-cheek 1990 creature-feature set in an isolated desert canyon town called Perfection, where prehistoric predators called graboids swam just beneath the surface of the earth as if it were water and periscoped up to feed on hapless humans. A number of direct-to-DVD sequels followed before the crazed subterranean horror thriller premise spawned a short-lived original series made for the Syfy Channel in 2003. Michael Gross reprises his feature-film role here as Burt Gummer, a survivalist gun-nut who refuses to leave his home despite the constant threat of becoming dinner for the underground omnivores, and he's joined by new arrival Tyler Reed (Victor Browne), who takes over a failed tour business and becomes Burt's wingman as they protect themselves from El Blanco—the mother of all graboids—and other feral species. The twist is that the valley has been turned into a government-protected sanctuary for the endangered graboids. But the other beasts on-hand are free game, which gives the humans plenty of opportunities to unleash arsenals of firepower, especially when the animals escape the confines of the valley. Marcia Strassman and Dean Norris costar in this

gore-fest comedy-adventure show sporting bloody effects and a playful sense of humor. Although hardly must-see TV, this set compiling all 13 episodes of the series is a strong optional purchase. (S. Axmaker)

### Wish Me Luck, Series 1 ★★★

Acorn, 2 discs, 388 min., not rated, DVD: \$39.99



The British Special Operations Executive (SEO), a World War II government unit that sent civilians into occupied France as undercover agents, is the focus of this ITV-aired series. The eight episodes compiled here from the 1988 first season trace Col. Cadogan's (Julian Glover) recruitment of Liz Grainger (Kate Buffery), an elegant wife and mother who becomes a courier; and Matty Firman (Suzanna Hamilton), a half-Jewish factory worker who's a crack radio operator. Also involved are their male colleagues on the continent (Michael J. Jackson and Jeremy Northam), as well as a French friend of Liz's (Jane Asher), who's forced by the local Nazi commander (Warren Clarke) to betray her friend. Budgetary concerns kept the occasional action sequences small-scale in this show that places more emphasis on relationships among characters, both in France and in the families left behind in England, as well as Cadogan's efforts to keep his agents safe while sending them on dangerous missions (Liz is married, with a young daughter and a husband unaware of her involvement, so her capture would prove a public relations nightmare). While the series often comes across as rather talky (and the overbearing background score is a distraction), the SOE's work is a fascinating sidelight to British war intelligence efforts, while the emphasis on female agents gives *Wish Me Luck* an unusual focus. DVD extras include a photo gallery and text info on several of the real women of the SOE. Recommended. (F. Swietek)

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