

## Crosscuts

BRIEF DVD REVIEWS

GRANT TRACEY



*Star Trek: The Original Series: Season One* (1966–67), Paramount/CBS, 2016, 24 hrs and 21 mins, \$24.99 • Enhanced, remastered, and brighter and more ebullient than ever, this 1960s masterpiece values liberal principles and the idea that every life is important. When you treat people with respect and dignity and give them social and economic equality the world is aglow with hopeful optimism. Shows like *Naked City*, *The Defenders*, and Rod Serling’s existential western *The Loner* weren’t full of dystopic, angsty realism, but character-driven people wanting love and the American Dream. *Star Trek* values life, peace, and understanding across cultures. James T. Kirk (William Shatner) is a great leader: smart, strong, compassionate, and forcible when the need arises. He makes moral decisions and apologizes after haranguing a fellow crew member. Mr. Spock (Leonard Nimoy) and his rational logic provides a fun counterpoint, and throw in the emotionalism of Dr. McCoy (DeForest Kelley) and you have a wonderful mix of storytelling gumbo. The early episodes are a little derivative of the premise to *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea* as some kind of monster infiltrates the USS Enterprise and must be held in check: “The Man Trap”; “Charlie X”; “Where No Man Has Gone Before”; and “The Enemy Within” all fit this mold. In the gritty “No Man—” a friend of Kirk’s, through psionic power, becomes a vengeful god; in Richard Matheson’s “The Enemy Within,” the *Voyage* formula is turned on its side as Kirk bifurcates into two selves, one ineffectual, the other ruthless. Everyone loves the Harlan Ellison episode that comes near the end of Season One, but my personal faves include the poignant “Miri” about children turning into radioactive pulp once they hit puberty; Gene Roddenberry’s two-part “Menagerie” where a debilitated man finds peace living in a world of illusion; “Shore Leave,” a frolicking party on a strange planet that personalizes fantasies into a series of cheap amusements, a kind of SF Coney Island romp; and the antiwar “A Taste of Armageddon” where a 500-year conflict has gone virtual. In order to be more “civilized” and protect the infrastructures of cities, computers play a war game in

which “victims” are selected through a draft lottery and ordered to commit state-sanctioned suicide. Of course, Kirk sets them straight. Mesmerizing, groundbreaking, and always worthy of revisiting, this *Star Trek* looks better than ever and has me yearning for a return to counter-culture idealism.

*Dead Pigeon on Beethoven Street* (1972), Olive Films, 2015, 127 mins, \$24.95 • Restored from 98 to 127 minutes, this director’s cut of Samuel Fuller’s homage to the French New Wave is deserving of reappraisal and rediscovery. Fuller’s tone here is refreshingly postmodern, affirming and denying his past potboiler yarns, mixing crime noir with Godardian pop-art sensibilities, shifting from the absurdly comic to the angsty sadistic. Sandy (Glenn Corbett, star of Fuller’s earlier classic *The Crimson Kimono* [1959]) is an American private eye in Germany, trying to uncover compromising photographs that could destroy a US senator’s career. Sandy gets mixed up with a sword-wielding kingpin and a quirky femme fatale (Christa Lang, Fuller’s wife). The film’s highlight: Sandy fights the

fencing maestro. Sandy’s no great shakes at fencing, so it’s an unfair duel, but the PI levels the field with typical American ingenuity, converting everything in the kingpin’s room to a weapon, tossing swords, spears, a telephone, a trophy, whatever he can muster at the sadist. Here, Fuller deconstructs the masculinist aesthetic of “fair fighting” and returns us to his dogface days of World War II, where as a corporal in the *Big Red One* Fuller did whatever he had to to survive the meat grinder of battle. Fascinating and a lot of fun.

*Carol* (2015), Weinstein, 2016, 118 mins, \$9.95 • The film opens with a shot of a subway grate and the distant thud and clack of a subway train, and then a man interrupts two women talking, the gist of their conversation muted, unheard. In the midst of these opening credits, director Todd Haynes gives a wonderful shout-out to the classic *Brief Encounter* (1945). There, a man has a muted conversation with a woman and an intruder, another woman, breaks their intimacy. We discover, through voiceover narration, that the man and woman are having an illicit affair: he’s a married doctor; she’s a married housewife. In Haynes’s film, set in 1952 NYC, the women’s love is queer-based, “illicit” in a different way, like the muted sounds of the subway train, their love is forced underground. Haynes cleverly borrows *Brief Encounter*’s narrative structuring, including a departing hand on a woman’s shoulder, but takes it in a different direction. His story lacks the first-person voiceover, creating characters at some distance from the spectator. Often we look at the two principles (Rooney Mara and Cate Blanchett) from another room, through a window, or are forced to shift our gaze beyond foreground clutter blocking their love. Haynes also disarms us with stillness, staying in the frame after a character exits. This unusual staging places us in and out of the characters’ world simultaneously. They are presented to us as “other” and we are made to feel “otherly” in the film’s stylistic choices, strangely and wonderfully aligning us with the characters’s discomfort of finding happiness in the repressive 1950s. Mesmerizing and poetically haunting. □