

I Believe...
My Top 10 Films from the 1950's Are...
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I Believe...the Ten films listed here show the amazing transformation of film from being a silent medium less than thirty years before to a medium showing great range and sophistication. The 50's were a period of the Cold War and the McCarthy Communist Hearings and most of the films below have a dark underbelly, even the famous Tony Curtis/Jack Lemmon comedy. Any list that has Gloria Swanson, Katherine Hepburn, Marlene Dietrich and Marilyn Monroe on it can't be all bad. Can you say "eclectic"?

- **"The Asphalt Jungle"** (1950), B&W. Sterling Hayden, Sam Jaffe. Director John Huston directs a slew of phenomenal actors in a dark and vicious world of thieves (Jaffe), murderers (Hayden), crooked politicians, bookies and hookers (a very young Marilyn Monroe in a dynamite role). Hayden was one of the first and great brooding actors of that period who has been regrettably forgotten by most audiences. This role was probably his definitive portrayal and it's a doozy.
- **"All About Eve"** (1950), B&W. Bette Davis, Anne Baxter, George Sanders, Thelma Ritter. Joseph Mankiewicz directs a peerless cast in a vitriolic and cynical story about an aging theater actress (Davis) and the scheming understudy (Baxter) who worms her way into the lives of people that showed her nothing but kindness and support. A viper-tongued critic (Sanders) aids her rise to stardom while a sharp-eyed dresser (Ritter) tries to protect her employer from betrayal. Marilyn Monroe again has a great bit part. Sparkling dialogue and phenomenal acting make this a mandatory film to see.
- **"Sunset Blvd."** (1950), B&W. Gloria Swanson, William Holden. Directed by the great Billy Wilder, this is my triumvirate of great, vicious and cynical films of 1950. Although considered a black comedy there's enough true tragedy in this film that pushes it into a category all it's own. An over-the-hill silent screen actress (Swanson) living in a dilapidated mansion in Hollywood takes in a struggling screen-writer (Holden) and makes him her plaything. Swanson actually was one of the most famous silent-screen actresses and scenes of her film "Queen Kelly" within this film were directed by the man who plays her put-upon butler, Erich von Stroheim. There's an unhealthy blur of fantasy and reality in this film that makes it one of a kind and mesmerizing.
- **"African Queen"** (1951), Color. Humphrey Bogart, Katherine Hepburn. John Huston directs this wonderful film about a drunkard boat captain (Bogart) and a spinster missionary (Hepburn) who are thrown together during WWI in Africa. They battle each other and the Germans with some of the best dialogue written for the screen. Although this is almost a two-person film you couldn't ask for two better actors and a better director. Truly a wonderful and uplifting film.
- **"Summertime"** (1955), Color. Katherine Hepburn, Rossano Brazzi. Directed by the legendary David Lean, this lovely, jewel of a film tells the tender story of an American librarian (Hepburn) visiting Venice for the first time. She encounters a kind and worldly-wise married man who teaches her to love unconditionally. In my view this is the epitome of Hepburn's acting: Subtle, vulnerable and heart-rending.

- **“Diabolique”** (1955 French), B&W. Simone Signoret, Vera Clouzot, Paul Meurisse. Henri-Georges Clouzot directs this taut, frightening thriller about an abusive school headmaster (Meurisse). His abused wife (Vera Clouzot, the director’s real-life wife) and his mistress (Signoret) decide to bump him off. But things go terribly wrong and nothing is what it seems to be. If I were you I’d watch this with my back to a wall.
- **“A Face in the Crowd”** (1957), B&W. Andy Griffith, Patricia Neal. Directed by Elia Kazan, this cautionary tale revolves around a “hobo” (Griffith) discovered by a woman (Neal) who becomes an influential and megalomaniacal TV star. A fascinating and wonderful film about the corrupting influence of power. If you thought you knew Griffith from “The Andy Griffith Show”, you ain’t seen nothin’ yet. A monster is born.
- **“Witness for the Prosecution”** (1957), B&W. Charles Laughton, Tyrone Power, Marlene Dietrich, Elsa Lanchester. Director Billy Wilder tackles one of the most famous of Agatha Christie’s mystery novels with a great cast and a superb script. A young man (Power) is accused of killing an older woman whom he was seeing. A lawyer (Laughton) takes on the case only to run into the young man’s German wife (Dietrich) who seems bent on seeing her husband convicted despite evidence to the contrary. Lighter moments pepper this great film between the lawyer’s long-suffering nurse (Lanchester, real-life wife to Laughton) and her employer, but you’ll never figure out the ending until it happens. Great!
- **“Vertigo”** (1958), Color. James Stewart, Kim Novak. Director Alfred Hitchcock’s most analyzed film tells the story of a retired police detective (Stewart) hired by an old school friend to follow his wife (Novak) because of strange behavior she’s exhibiting. I won’t say more although that synopsis only takes up about the first fifteen minutes of the film. I’ve seen the original cut of this film, which is the one I recommend, since the Stewart character is truly a disturbing portrait of an obsessed and disturbed man. This film proved once and for all that Novak was a worthy actress and she’s great, in this.
- **“The Some Like It Hot”** (1959), Color. Jack Lemmon, Tony Curtis, Marilyn Monroe, Joe E. Brown. Director Billy Wilder (do you get the impression I admire Wilder?) takes us on a careening ride about two musician’s (Lemmon and Curtis) in the 20’s who mistakenly witness the Valentine’s Day Massacre and have to run for their lives from the gangsters. So where do they hide? In plain site as female musicians in an all-girl band where they encounter Sugar (Monroe) and a dim-witted but loveable millionaire (Brown) who has the best closing line in film history. A true pleasure.

Three of these films feature Marilyn Monroe from the time she was a starlet in 1950 until she was a box office sensation in 1959. Although her persona was the ditzzy blonde who was smarter than she looked, she was able to parlay that character into an icon that has lasted until now. If she had lived she would be 78 years old this year.

Please feel free to contact me with comments or subject suggestions at:
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