

# My Ten Favourite Romantic Dramas

Romance is a dish I prefer served doomed.

[Simon Dillon](#)

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Doomed Romance: The English Patient. Credit: Miramax

Here are my ten favourite romantic films. I should preface them by saying I have a penchant for doomed romance (romantic comedies notwithstanding), so most of the following fall into that category. Those that don't still have a substantial quantity of general doominess, as I am a bit of an emotional masochist. To paraphrase Carey Mulligan's Sally Sparrow in the sublime *Blink* episode of *Doctor Who*,

sad is happy for deep people.

In the past, I have argued horror and weepies are two sides of the same coin. Just as I love to be terrorised by the ruthless dexterity of a well-crafted scary film, so I love to experience catharsis by living vicariously through heartrending romantic tragedy on the cinema screen (and in print for that matter).

In many ways, falling in love *is* a horror story, of a kind. Feeling that much out of control is frightening. I certainly felt alarmed at the depth of my obsession when I met my wife, as though I were spinning out of control. I felt like I had two choices: I was going to marry her, or I was going to die.

What does that say about me as a person? I don't know, and to be honest, I don't care enough to secure the services of a therapist. But as someone who has outsourced their emotions to cinema (give or take the aforementioned passion concerning my wife), I enjoy films that scar, films that traumatise, films that make me feel alive. They are a form of release, so I can carry on normal life maintaining the appearance of an emotionless automaton. No, I don't care if you think that's unhealthy.

A brief word on criteria: I'm sticking to my ten-year rule with this selection, as I do think films need time to "mature", before they can be considered classics or indeed favourites. Otherwise, I'd be including the most recent version of *A Star is Born*, which just gets better with each

viewing. I'm also deliberately omitting musicals and romantic comedies, as I've spoken about those at length recently [here](#) and [here](#), respectively. Nor am I including animation (so no Disney fairy tales or anime gems such as *Your Name*).

Without further ado, here are my choices, in chronological order. Please note: **This article will have no regard for spoilers**, so if you come across a film you've not seen, I recommend skimming past to the next one.

## Gone with the Wind (1939)



Credit: MGM

I know some reading this are rolling their eyes reading this, but my response to that is frankly my dear, I don't give a damn. Victor Fleming's big, bold, colourful, magnificent epic may boast a buttock-numbing running time, not to mention

dubious racist elements, but as a soapy romantic wallow set against the turmoil of the American Civil War, it is still pretty much unsurpassed. The tempestuous relationship between Scarlett O'Hara (Vivien Leigh) and Rhett Butler (Clark Gable) sizzles from start to finish. I find Scarlett's plight increasingly moving with every viewing.

Yes, she's bratty and manipulative, but also strong and determined, doing whatever it takes to survive in a man's world, whilst being considered cold for it, on account of her sex. I admire her immensely and feel desperately sorry for her amid the sad convergence of circumstances in the finale. Let's face it: Her lifelong crush Ashley (Leslie Howard) *did* lead her on, despite being married to the saintly but passive Melanie (Olivia de Havilland). It takes the entire film for Scarlett to realise she'd rather be with Rhett, only for Rhett to leave in that famous final scene. Frankly my dear, I think Rhett is intolerably cruel to do so.

I can't mention *Gone with the Wind* without also giving credit to the brilliant talents of Butterfly McQueen as Prissy, and Hattie McDaniel, who plays Mammy. The latter won a well-deserved Oscar for her outstanding supporting performance.

## **Casablanca (1942)**



Credit: Warner Brothers

"Of all the gin joints, in all the towns, in all the world, she walks into mine." So begins this bonafide cinema classic; a wartime drama set around a Casablanca nightclub owned by the cynical Rick (Humphrey Bogart), who famously sticks his neck out for no one. Yet when Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman) walks back into his life, having vanished after a tumultuous Parisian affair on the eve of Nazi invasion, the stage is set for one of the screen's most beloved romantic dramas.

*Casablanca* features what is widely considered one of the greatest screenplays of all time (courtesy of Julius J Epstein, Philip G Epstein, and Howard Koch). It also boasts a stunning supporting cast featuring the likes of Claude Rains, Conrad Veidt, Paul Henreid, Sydney Greenstreet, and Peter Lorre. Originally planned as a run-of-the-mill, top-of-the-bill filler, it was initially considered so unremarkable that Warner Brothers considered relegating it to B-movie status,

and casting Ronald Reagan and Ann Sheridan instead. However, director Michael Curtiz ensured the cast we know and love remained in the picture.

Though originally intended as propaganda (to get the American public behind involvement in the war, post-Pearl Harbour), *Casablanca* became something truly transcendent. Eighty years on, it remains one of the most beloved of all romantic tear-jerkers, especially in that famous airport finale. It is also remarkable how so much of the screenplay has entered popular discourse in much the same way as Shakespeare and The Bible. "Round up the usual suspects", "Here's looking at you kid", "We'll always have Paris", and many others are now embedded in the cultural consciousness.

## Brief Encounter (1945)



Credit: Eagle Lion Distributors

There's no such thing as a perfect film. But if there were, it would look like *Brief Encounter*. The first of three David Lean films to make my list, this sublime collaboration between Lean and Noel Coward concerns an adulterous love affair between Celia Johnson and Trevor Howard, who meet by chance in a railway station coffee shop, when Johnson gets a cinder caught in her eye and Howard helps her remove it.

What follows is the dictionary definition of heartrending; a repressed, frustrated, painfully British tale of love and desperation. "I didn't think such violent things could happen to ordinary people," Johnson laments inwardly. Her melancholia is beautifully contrasted with the humane good humour of the supporting cast in the coffee shop. As for Lean, this is an early example of his genius as one of cinema's greatest visual poets, filling the screen with unforgettable monochrome imagery.

It builds to one of the most achingly sad finales in cinema history. When Johnson and Howard's precious final seconds together are so cruelly interrupted, it is almost too much to bear. I find myself wanting to climb inside the screen and tear that ghastly gossipy woman away from them, so they can say farewell in peace. I also think Johnson's boorish husband (brilliantly played by Cyril Raymond) may have known or suspected about the affair, but his kindness in overlooking it, perhaps realising he ought not to take his wife for granted, is hinted at in the final scene. I'm not ashamed to admit this film makes me cry



every time I watch it.

## Doctor Zhivago (1965)



Credit: MGM

David Lean again, this time on a vast, epic, widescreen canvas, adapting Boris Pasternak's celebrated novel set against the turmoil of the Russian revolution. The eponymous Zhivago (Omar Sharif), poet and doctor, is a man in love with two women. He loves and cares for his wife Tonya (Geraldine Chaplin), but his fiery passion for the enigmatic Lara (Julie Christie) places him in an agonising emotional predicament that ultimately leads to tragedy.

[I've written elsewhere about my love for this film](#)

(specifically the formative role it played in getting me to think about the horrors of political extremism), but first and foremost this is a must-see-on-the-big-screen passionate romance, aided and abetted by beautiful cinematography and a magnificent Maurice Jarre score. "Wouldn't it have been lovely if we'd met before?" Lara ponders, ahead of the



tragic finale. "I think we may go mad, if we think about all that," Yuri replies. "I shall always think about it," Lara responds, almost defiantly.

## Far From the Madding Crowd (1967)



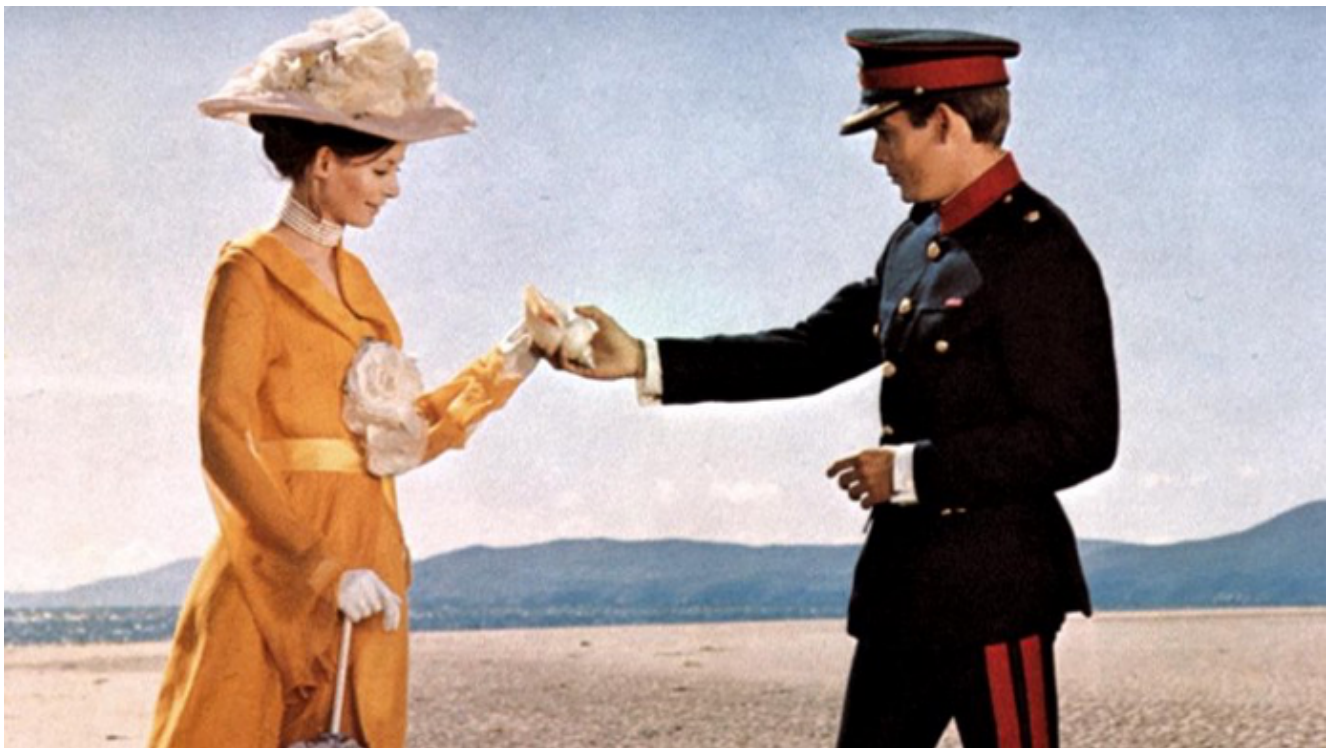
Credit: MGM

Julie Christie again, this time as Bathsheba Everdene, the protagonist of my favourite Thomas Hardy novel. After inheriting a farm in nineteenth-century Dorset, Bathsheba is courted by and has a profound effect on three very different men. Rakish Sergeant Frank Troy (Terence Stamp), down-to-earth sheep farmer Gabriel Oak (Alan Bates), and prosperous landowner William Boldwood (Peter Finch) all wind up competing for Bathsheba's affections.

John Schlesinger's [criminally underrated film](#) features outstanding performances, vivid, dirt-under-the-fingernails

cinematography from Nic Roeg, and an evocative score from Richard Rodney Bennett, who also uses authentic folk songs at key points in the story. All told, this is a richly atmospheric, swooning tale of passion, romance, lust, and obsession, with the shocking turns expected in a Hardy narrative, but shot through with humanity and compassion. Incidentally, don't confuse this with the wholly inferior 2015 remake. Much as I admire Thomas Vinterberg's other work, his take isn't a patch on Schlesinger's.

## Ryan's Daughter (1970)



Credit: MGM

It is astonishing to think this latter-day romantic epic from David Lean was eviscerated by critics. Lean was so hurt by their words that he wouldn't make another film for fourteen years (his final work, an adaptation of EM Forster's *A Passage to India*). If that doesn't make you hate critics, I

don't know what will. At any rate, *Ryan's Daughter* is so obviously a masterpiece that one can't help wondering if those who slated the film at the time were lying, blind, or mad. Yes, all right, it's a bit long, but it's certainly not short on superb performances, vivid widescreen vistas (incredible waves and coastlines), and emotional anguish dialled up to eleventy-stupid. At any rate, the film has since been critically reevaluated in a much more generous light.

Essentially a re-telling of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, the plot, set in a remote Irish village circa 1917, concerns Rosy (Sarah Miles), who after falling for and marrying village schoolteacher Charles (Robert Mitchum), is disappointed to find him quiet and rather uninterested in making love. Unhappy and unfulfilled, Rosy's affections turn to British Major Randolph Doryan (Christopher Jones), who is suffering from shell shock trauma. A passionate affair ensues, but the couple is undone when their secret liaisons are witnessed by local halfwit Michael (John Mills).

The plot also involves the clash between the Irish Republican Brotherhood and the British army. As with *Doctor Zhivago*, political allegiances become an impediment to the romance. But despite this tumultuous historic backdrop, the relationship between Rosy and Randolph remains the driving force of the narrative. David Lean certainly liked his agonised tales of adultery, didn't he? At any rate, this is another heartstring-tugging gem, and a big personal favourite.



# Cyrano De Bergerac (1990)



Credit: UGC

I've yet to see *Cyrano*, Joe Wright's new musical film version of the celebrated play by Edmond Rostand. It has been adapted many times before, even being updated to 1980s America in *Roxanne* (starring Steve Martin). Most memorably, Jean-Paul Rappeneau's splendid and to my mind definitive take features an arguably career-best performance from Gerard Depardieu. This is a beautifully acted and directed piece of work, and frankly, Wright has some big shoes to fill.

As Cyrano, Depardieu excels. His sublime wit gains him admiration and respect, as well as a few enemies, despite his long nose. But Cyrano believes he will be unable to win his secret love Roxane (Anne Brochet), a cousin who he has

known since childhood, on account of said nasal protuberance. Enter handsome dimwit Christian (Vincent Perez), who rather fancies Roxane. Cyrano helps him win her heart, by letting his cousin believe Christian is the author of his love letters. Comedic complications ensue, building to an inevitable, tragic climax.

## **The Remains of the Day (1993)**



Credit: Sony

James Ivory's greatest film is a masterful adaption of Kazuo Ishiguro's equally superb Booker Prize-winning novel, featuring career-best turns from Anthony Hopkins and Emma Thompson. Nearly thirty years later I am still raging that they didn't win Best Actor and Actress respectively, at the 1994 Oscars. Suffice to say, their pairing in this tale of — amongst other things — unrequited love, is beyond brilliant.

The plot concerns butler Stevens (Hopkins), looking back from the 1950s to the 1930s, when his master Lord Darlington (Edward Fox) misguidedly made peace-in-our-time Nazi appeasement overtures. Stevens's devotion to duty and his master — not to mention his also being almost comically repressed — causes him to overlook the gentle advances of housekeeper Miss Kenton (Thompson). Years later, Stevens wants to make amends, but is it too late?

[I've written at length elsewhere about my love for this film,](#) and what it means to me personally, suffice to say as a subtle, understated, cautionary tale concerning wasted lives, it has no equal. It gets under the skin like few other films I know, concealing a potent, melancholy, slow-burn power that proves devastating in the final scenes. The sadness of this film would be unbearable if it weren't for the wit and good humour leavening the story elsewhere. See, for instance, the hilarious scene where Hopkins is asked by Lord Darlington to educate his godson (played by Hugh Grant) about the facts of life.

## **The English Patient (1996)**





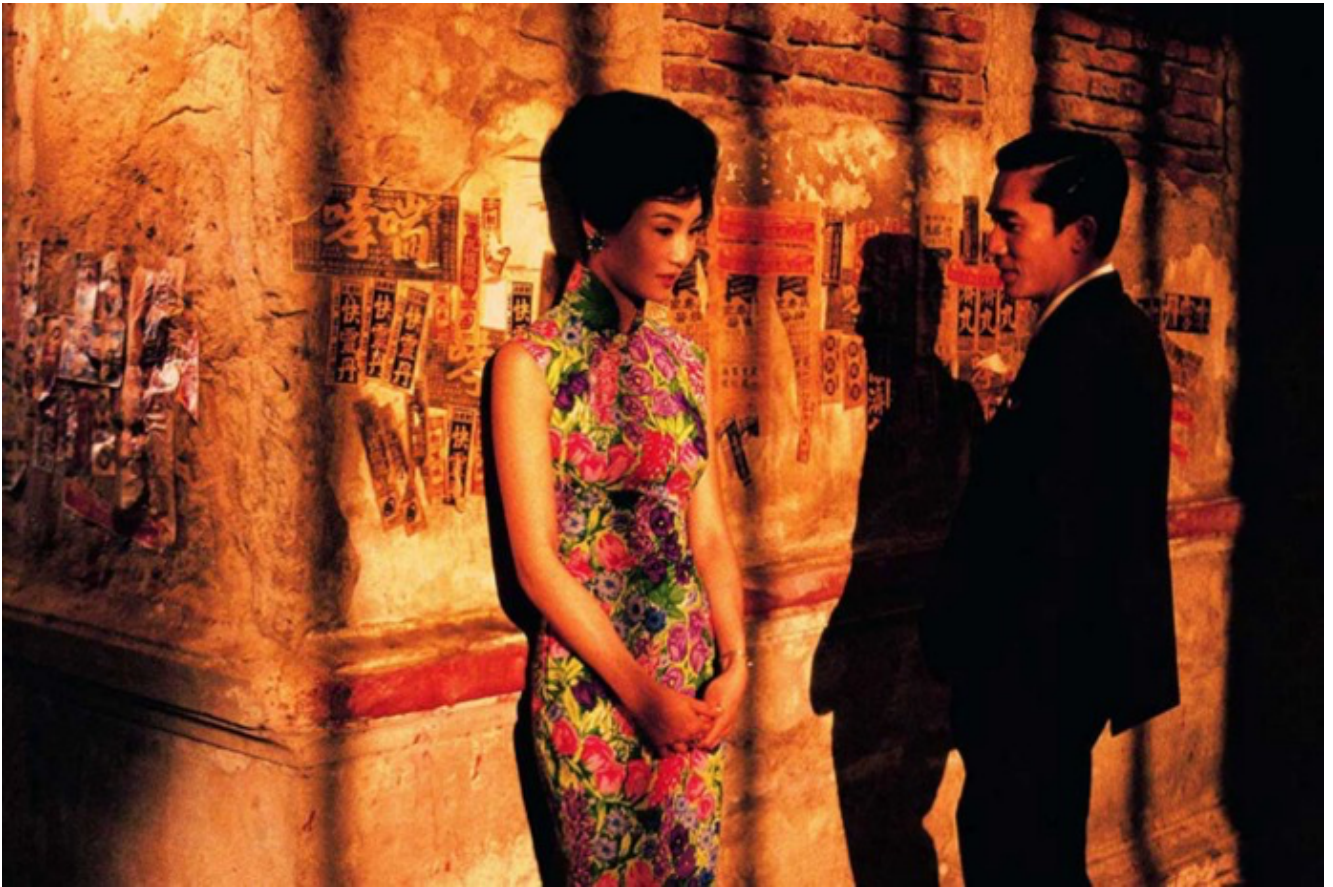
Credit: Miramax

Another Booker prize-winner is adapted in Anthony Minghella's Oscar-winning masterpiece. This time, the eponymous novel by Michael Ondaatje gets the big-screen treatment. And what a treatment! Kristin Scott Thomas and Ralph Fiennes are utterly electrifying as the adulterous couple at the heart of this vivid, passionate, powerfully moving wartime tale of love and betrayal. The film plays like a latter-day David Lean epic, featuring epic desert vistas and equally epic emotions.

The romantic narrative is told in flashback, bookended by a secondary love story between French-Canadian nurse Hana (Juliette Binoche) and Kip (Naveen Andrews), a Sikh sapper in the British army. Both romances are gripping and heartrending, with Fiennes on particularly great form. One moment of visceral tragic anguish late in the film felt as

though it tore a chunk out of my heart, the first time I saw it. I should add that this film features one of my top three music scores of the 1990s, an Oscar-winning emotive masterpiece courtesy of Gabriel Yared.

## **In the Mood for Love (2000)**



Credit: Focus Features

As far as I'm concerned, this is Wong Kar-Wai's greatest film. It concerns two neighbours (Tony Leung and Maggie Cheung) in 1960s Hong Kong, whose spouses are frequently away on business. When they discover said spouses are having an affair, they find comfort in one another's companionship. They roleplay their spouses, trying to understand how the affair began, but also inevitably develop feelings for one another.

This deceptively simple, understated gem is a masterclass in subtlety and nuance, featuring superb central performances, masterful direction, beautiful cinematography, and clever use of music (by Shigeru Umebayashi and Mike Galasso). The film crackles with emotional tension in the replication of the affairs, yet without the sexual culmination. But will their resolve not to take that final step hold? Oozing with aching, longing, regret, and teasing ambiguity (what is unseen and inferred is as important as what is seen), *In the Mood for Love* is simply sublime.

What are your favourite romantic dramas? Are you upset I missed out *Titanic*, *Before Sunrise*, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, *Shakespeare in Love*, or any of the versions of *Romeo and Juliet*, *Anna Karenina*, *Pride and Prejudice*, or *Jane Eyre*? Should I have allowed for *Slumdog Millionaire* or Powell and Pressburger dramas such as *A Matter of Life and Death* and *The Red Shoes*?

Let me know in the comments, but please note: Romantic comedies (as opposed to dramas) are **not** admissible in this discussion (if you want to suggest romantic comedies, please do so in the comments on [this piece](#) instead). Also, to pre-empt any mention of the ghastly *Legends of the Fall*, please note it will be met with a link to [this article](#) in my reply.

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