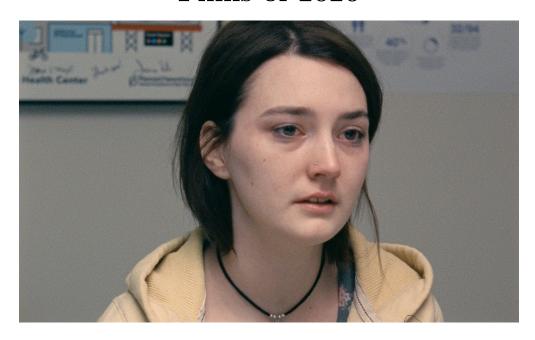# Films of 2020

Rules: 1) Almost always be (primarily) English language, 2) Must be a non-documentary feature. Sorry, otherwise this list gets another 20+ films added and I do not have that much time. 3) US Theatrical(-ish) release in 2020 (some of these films might have IMDb years for earlier due to film festival releases, or a 2019 Australian release before a 2020 US release). This year US theatrical-ish release has been pushed to its limits; some films with early 2021 releases – but a 2020 film festival showing – that are award eligible, are counted as 2020.

This final rule has been stretched even further, films with a strict early-2021 release but nominated for a major award (Oscars, BAFTA, Critic's Choice, Golden Globes) are included. However, some films (e.g., *Nine Days* and *County Lines*) are nominated for various awards but have had US releases pushed back to mid-2021. These films will be on the 2021. The films that are technically 2021 but US Award eligible (an Oscars list can be found here; e.g., *Judas and the Black Messiah* and *The White Tiger*) will be denoted with a dagger (†).

Within a tier, I believe the films are roughly the same quality. Between tiers, I believe there is enough distinction to say a film is better than those in the lower tier. Although, that distinction is blurrier for films at the bottom of a tier and the films at the top of the previous tier.

Selection Criteria: 1) Oscar Nominated, 2) Golden Globe Nominated, 3) Independent Spirit Awards, 4) BAFTA, 5) GLAAD Awards, 6) NAACP Image, 7) AACTA Awards (Australian Oscars) 8) Sundance, 9) SAG Awards, 10) AFI Top 10, 11) National Board of Review, 12) Critic's Choice Awards, 13) British Independent Film Awards, 14) Annie Awards, 15) My own idiosyncratic preferences, 16) Some heterogeneous-minimum Rotten Tomatoes score regardless if nominated. Note: These are not necessarily the ranking of a criterion's importance.

[A selection criterion is in brackets to give an idea of why the film was on my list; award nominations are given preference, but also my own idiosyncratic reasons for watching, when applicable. Films were on the list before awards seasons, but the nominations/awards reflect that these did end up being good films.].

Streaming service (Amazon Prime, Disney+, HBOMax, Hulu, Apple TV+, and Netflix) up-to-date as of **4/18/21**; afterwards who knows. So watch them now.

Tier 16: A Movie So Bad I Lost Some Respect for Janelle Monáe

176. **Antebellum:** The film starts with the lovely and lengthy tracking shot. After that everything is down hill. The script is awful, with horrible dialogue and a premise that the writers-and-directors team decided to do absolutely nothing with. The film is overly long, with almost nothing happening for about 50 minutes. The film does not contain characters but caricatures. The only reason I can think that someone loved the movie was they watched it without sound (some of the shots did look good) or they felt compelled to toss aside their integrity for a pointless display of performative wokeness. [The trailer was good, and then I was bored after seeing the bad reviews], *Hulu.*

Tier 15: Bad Movies

175. **Wasp Network:** Written and directed by Olivier Assayas (*Personal Shopper* and *Clouds of Sils Maria*) yet, this film is a complete mess. Even with a great cast (Penelope Cruz and Ana de Armas have ensamble roles) the characters are bland. This is a complete miss; not only is it bad it isn't a dumb watch like the other low ranked films on the list. [Assayas had directed good films], *Netflix.*

174. **The Hunt:** Similar to *Antebellum*, the film as a good premise and instead wastes it on extremely forced political takes covering just about everything; rather than focusing a few specific ideas to comment on, it wanted to tackle them all. However, unlike *Antebellum*, *The Hunt* is not pretending to be a serious film, it knows it is an odd horror-satire; making the films slightly more tolerable. [The Most Dangerous Game is a fun premise].

173. **Wonder Woman 1984:** At this point we gotta seriously considering taking the franchise away from Patty Jenkins. The first film was good until the final act completely ruined everything. The sequel is two-and-a-half hours of hot garbage. Multiple scenes could be cut; if a film is going to be bad, at least be short. Characters are cartoon villains and lack anything in the way of character development. There are so many plot holes you could fly an invisible jet through. [Sequel].

172. **The Babysitter: Killer Queen:** The sequel to the highly enjoyable teen horror-comedy *The Babysitter* (2017). While the original was perfectly camp and sentimental, the sequel leaned into the campy humor making the sequel rather bad. The film also forgot that Samara Weaving (*Ready or Not*) was the best part of the original and focused the film around Cole (the babysittee from the original). Jenna Ortega (*Stuck in the Middle*) plays against type, and does not pull it off. McG is a better director than this [effort]. I hope they save the franchise as the original was a fun late-night watch—the sequel was not. [Sequel], *Netflix.*

Tier 14: Not Good, But Has A Single Redeeming Quality

171. **Hillbilly Elegy:** Outside of Glenn Close (and also Amy Adams, but not as much) the film does nothing right. Glenn Close is the reason for this ranking. The actors cast to play young and old JD are out of their depth in any scene with Close or Adams. The film is bad Oscars bait, that fails to make compelling characters and is one of the worst films made about trying to 'portray' 'real' Americans. The script and dialogue is face-palm bad. The simply-work-hard-and-you'll-get-into-Yale-Law message is straight bootstrap poverty porn; the film refuses to engage in the real issues of Rust Belt/Appalachian poverty. The entire film is a mess. [Oscars – Best Supporting Actress Nominee], *Netflix.*

170. **Mulan (2020):** While watching, you get the feeling that this film was not made for a US audience (*Lion King (2019)* was objectively bad and Americans still flocked to see it). Instead, it feels like *Mulan (2020)* was aimed at making all of the money in China, even if it meant cozying up with people

orchestrating an actual honest-to-god genocide. Oh, and to make matters worse, instead of Mulan winning though hard-work and wit, she possesses Chi; making her basically a super warrior. Also, the action sequences are bad; the running on walls, and jumping over literally streets is outrageous (even if an homage; what you are honoring could still be bad). Though, the landscapes are amazing, the cinematography is nice for the mountain scenes. [Oscars – Best Visual Effects Nominee], *Disney+*.

169. **The One and Only Ivan:** The strengths are the visual effects (animals looks rather realistic) and a good voice cast, plus Bryan Cranston in a human role. The is standard child entertainment, and does it well-enough. However the film very much avoids the much trickier subjects of animal cruelty and instead only thinks about scratching the surface of the issue. [Oscars – Best Visual Effects Nominee], *Disney+*.

168. **Emperor:** The film shows little interest in being historically accurate (which I personally do not mind), except the film makes a point – its first point – that Civil War history was written by white men (if you want to make a point about fixing historical inaccuracies, maybe don't make all sorts of stuff up). The effects are rather bad, the dialogue is rather bad. The plot is not good either. [NAACP – Best Independent Feature Nominee].

167. **Save Yourselves!:** A comedy sci-fi film about the end of the world, that is devoid of laughs (admittedly, it could be the type of laugh the film wanted, it a type of comedy I do not find funny at all). The film flips back and forth between millennials not knowing how to do anything/being glued to technology and then millenials learning how to adult. Throw in a few forced liberal jokes (we are not getting the gun, I'm more likely too shoot you than what is attacking us) and you get a film that drags on and on, while only being 93 minutes. [Well-reviewed Sci-fi Film], *Hulu*.

166. **The Prom:** Based on a Broadway musical, the film is not good, though at times it so cheesy/bad it becomes enjoyable. The cast is essentially wasted; especially Meryl Streep, Nicole Kidman, and Kelly Washington (Kevin Chamberlin (*Jessie* also has a small role). Jo Ellen Pellman could be worth keeping an eye on going forward. The film is too much of an LGBT film to make straight people, with muddled social commentary (East Coast Liberals also learn to be better people!), and the meta-Broadway jokes do not work. [GLAAD – Best Wide Release Nominee], *Netflix*.

165. **Tesla:** The film took a lot of risks, and they did not pay off. In particular, the narration scenes were a bad version of Margot Robbie in *The Big Short*. Ethan Hawke wasn't given much to work with. The obvious green screen or matte painting background scenes did not work either. Nikola Tesla deserves a better biopic. [Ethan Hawke], *Hulu*.

164. **Scoob:** The animation wasn't that good. The plot was overly predictable. However, what the film accomplished was proper fan service. Any fan of the franchise will get the multitude of deep cuts referenced throughout the movie. Hopefully they continue with films, but work on improving the plot. [I love Scooby], *HBOMax*.

Tier 13: Still Not Good, But The Good Parts Are Better

163. **The Midnight Sky:** Say what you want about this movie but 100 million dollars can still get you amazing effects. The effects, locations, and cinematography are all great. Yet the plot is a retread of other space films (*2001*, *Gravity*, etc). The film tries to develop characters, but is not able to do so. George Clooney is a good actor, but his rile demanded a great one. Too often the film relies on random events to advance the plot. Exogeniety is good in econometrics but bad in movie plots. The film could have cut a few sequences, but that still might have improved it much. [Oscars – Best Visual Effects Nominee], *Netflix*.

162. **The True Adventures of Wolfboy:** The first two-thirds of the movie are basically trash; plots holes all over, multiple facepalms, etc. For example, if you shave it does not come in thicker, this simply is not true. The final act attempts to save the film, but you can't help but have lost all interest. [GLAAD – Best Limited Release Film], *Amazon Prime.*

161. **Sonic the Hedgehog:** Ben Schwartz's voice acting does a lot of the heavy lifting for the film. Jim Carrey is good enough as the villain, Dr. Robotnik, but the character is overly cliche. The film is shockingly conservative (yes the couple is interracial): the small-town sheriff wants to leave to San Francisco so he can do some real good (Sonic recognizes the charm of the small town), Robotnik is the evil nerd who relies on technology and talks down on the simpleton townsfolks. The film is fun enough though; a good adaptation that retains a lot of the nostalgia of the video game while seamlessly incorporating said nostalgia into an earth-set film. [I played the video game as a kid] *Hulu.*

160. **How to Build a Girl:** Your enjoyment will probably come down to how you view Beanie Feldstein's (*Booksmart*) accent. If, like me, you found it awful and grating, it makes the film extremely difficult to get through. Being set in a small English town adds little to plot, either cast an English actress or set the film in the United States. Feldstein's accent is turrible. It also does not help that the film is far inferior *Booksmart* (I assume the relation is why Feldstein was cast; outside of the horrible accent, she was rather good). You can decide on the accent yourself by watching the trailer: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X7rPlAv1Ceo. [Well-reviewed Comedy].

159. **Stargirl:** Based on the young adult novel of the same name, the film can't overcome it's cheesiness and overt preaching of the messages. Also Grace VanderWaal is not good enough to carry the film (compared to young adult films in the next tier with better leading ladies). It is sentimental enough and fun enough to rank here, instead of lower. Also, it featured some of the worst shot football scenes in film history. [I read the book a long time ago], *Disney+.*

158. **Gretel & Hansel:** Even at 90 minutes, the film seems long; the story of Hansel and Gretel simply is not a long one. The film tries to give Gretel and the Witch some characterization, but it isn't enough. The strength is in Oz Perkins (*The Blackcoat's Daughter* and *I Am the Pretty Thing That Lives in the House*) direction. The film looks great, and although his two previous films have not been great (*Blackcoat* is good, *Pretty* is a slog), he is cementing himself as a director whose films look good. [Well-enough-reviewed Horror] *Amazon Prime, Hulu.*

157. **Bad Hair:** This horror comedy does not work. It isn't that funny, and the horror spoofs are bad— especially the score. Perhaps in a pre-*Get Out* the film works better as a commentary on black culture, but its themes are both obvious and muddled. The cast is impressive, but the characters are mainly one dimensional. [Well-enough-reviewed Horror], *Hulu.*

156. **Burden:** The film a miss. It easy to see why it won in Sundance, because of the extremely obvious race-relations. Yet the film is too straight-forward with the characters; there is not much in the way of subtlety. Then the plot is straight-forward and overly predictable, enough to face palm a few times. [Sundance – Audience Award].

155. **The United States vs Billie Holiday**[†]**:** Andra Day is good (both acting and singing). The rest of the cast includes some goods actors as well; Leslie Jordan, Trevante Rhodes, Rob Morgan to name a few). That is where the accolades end. The script is rather bad; both sprawling across Holiday's life semi-haphazardly, poorly written dialogue, and scenes that are a tad too on-the-nose. Also Lee Daniel's direction is not good either. The film bounces between biopic, documentary, and period piece, and the bounces are the opposite of seamless. [Oscar – Best Actress Nominee], *Hulu.*

154. **Underwater:** By most standards this film is not very good, it is an underwater *Alien(s)* ripoff. Kristen Stewart is good, but is not given a character to portray, but a warm body. T.J. Miller is

rather funny in the comedic relief role (you can guess what happens to his character). Yet, the studio did viewers a favor by cutting the film down to a little over 90 minutes (compare to say *Wonder Woman 1984* being two-and-a-half hours long); you can also tell when scenes were cut. However, at the end of it, the set design, costume (or should I say diving suit) design, and cinematography were all great. Multiple shots in the film look great, and combined these can put the film above the also-not-good films in the previous tier. [Kristen Stewart], *HBOMax*.

Tier 12: A Hodgepodge of Meh

153. **Extraction:** Most of the film is a standard action movie; reused themes, video game-like endless stream of 'villains'/bodies to shoot. Yet there is one sequence that is amazing (depending on the weight one places on that one sequence the film could easily move up, or down, a tier). Yet, at the end of the day, this is another – in a growing list – of *John Wick* knock offs. [Critic's Choice – Best Action Movie Nominee], *Netflix*.

152. **The Croods: A New Age:** The film is inferior to the original, and not because a lot of continuity was forgotten (the director and screenwriters are new; though the story was by the original writers). The voice cast is still good (led by Nic Cage, Emma Stone, and Ryan Reynolds). The animation quality is good, and the reason for any nominations, not the plot. [Annie – Best Animated Film Nominee].

151. **Ride Like a Girl:** An extremely standard girl-power sports movie; Michelle Payne becomes the first woman jockey to win a prominent Australian horse race. It leans into the real life story a bit too much at times, but then not enough at others; making a choppy film. The two highlights are: i) Stevie Payne, plays himself (he has down syndrome and accompanied the real life Michelle during her career), and ii) Teresa Palmer (*Hacksaw Ridge* and *Berlin Syndrome*) is good, and charming. Otherwise, do not expect much. [AACTA – Best Picture Nominee], *Netflix*.

150. **Pieces of a Woman:** The lengthy opening scene, filmed in one continuous take, is technically brilliant. However, the rest of the film is downhill from there (though, the downhill starts during the opening scene). The primary issue of the film, is that it is impossible to feel sorry for someone who willingly eschews modern medicine. A character who chooses a home birth, can not become sympathetic. Although Vanessa Kirby is good, and Shia LeBeouf is good, and Ellen Burstyn is good, it still is not enough. There is also a forced Holocaust-sub plot, as well as too many genre cliches: husband relapsing, affairs, etc. The acting is not good enough to overcome these multiple flaws. Perhaps if the technically brilliant opening sequence and the acting of Kirby and Burstyn can overcome the flaws, the movie could be ranked higher. [Oscars – Best Actress Nominee], *Netflix*.

149. **Vivarium:** The film is overly stylized. The film gives off the impression that it is this deep statement on suburban-family-life. Yet, the film doesn't offer much new to say beyond that life can be hell. Imogen Poots and Jesse Eisenberg are both good enough, but are not given much to work with. Certain scenes are obvious cut, or the writer-director could not write the scene well enough. The film is an ambitious miss. [Well-enough-reviewed Sci-fi Film], *Amazon Prime*.

148. **Malcolm & Marie**†**:** The film is an hour-and-forty-minute Festivus celebration for writer-director Sam Levinson, in that the script is a self-indulgent airing of grievances—grievances that Levinson has for critics and that the characters in the film have for each other. One of the main issues is that the film gets into the fight extremely quickly and the fight quickly goes from zero to sixty. The film simply can not maintain that pace; the fight is not a slow boil. Both Zendaya and John David Washington are good, the camera work is great, and the house the film is set in is amazing (the camera work also makes great use of the home's windows). [Critic's Choice – Best Actress Nominee], *Netflix*.

147. **The Other Lamb:** Although described as a horror, I would not call this a horror film (perhaps that played into this low rating). The film itself is also rather slow, even with a 97 minute run time. There is a good film to be made with the idea; women who are in a cult and the abuse they endure at the hands of the cult leader (it very much is a film about reproductive rights and freedoms). The cinematography is also rather good. Yet the plot rarely achieves much with its premise, there are not scares, and items in the film seem to be included without a good reason (only that they make it more mysterious for the sake of pure mystery). [Well-enough-reviewed Horror Film], *Hulu.*

146. **Run:** Directed by Aneesh Chaganty and co-written with Sev Ohanian (both in the same roles in *Searching*). Although the directing is good, with good cinematography, and carried by the two leads: Sarah Paulson and Kiera Allen (film debut). However, neither actress is good enough to elevate the film above sloppy writing. Although the first third of the film follows standard genre cliches, the stars and direction carry. The second third starts getting iffier, while the final third is ex machinas (to make the hero's journey even harder; out of no where) and overly cliche genre standards. If you can tolerate the plot holes, this film can rank higher. [Well-reviewed Horror], *Hulu.*

145. **Ride Your Wave:** I almost considered ranking this film first as it correctly points out the dangers of fireworks, and fireworks are awful, so this film deserves credit there. The animation is nothing special. The plot itself is nothing special either. The film is uplifting and positive. It is a nice little watch if interested in watching an anime. [Annie Awards – Best Independent Animated Film], *HBOMax.*

144. **A Whisker Away:** The animation is not as good as other recent animes. The plot itself is rather basic with its themes about teenage life (others have deeper characters). However, the film is heart-warming and cheerful (also, kitties!). Keep expectations low and film is an enjoyable watch. [Well-reviewed Anime], *Netflix.*

143. **Sorry We Missed You:** Directed by Ken Loach and written by Paul Laverty (team behind *I, Daniel Blake*) created a well-meaning dud. The film is meant to be an serious investigation of workers in the gig economy. Yet, it is an overly-slow poorly-acted disaster-spiral. Nothing ever goes right for the family (who is already suffering from the fallout of the Great Recession; because this movie needs to be very on point). What follows is an hour and forty minutes of the situation getting progressively worse for the family. [BAFTA – Outstanding British Film Nominee].

142. **The Surrogate:** A film that my idiosyncratic preferences probably rate much lower than most. The tension of the film results from the surrogate mother for a gay couple finding out the child will be born with Down's Syndrome. The couple, upon finding out, no longer want the child. Given that I am #TeamNoKids, the morality of the situation is lost on me; that is one reason why I would not want kids. Watching the couple slowly 'admit' they simply do not want the kids because of DS, is not dramatic for me. This then also makes the the character of the potential would-be mother too simplistic (there is an entire scene about eugenics, which I found grating). Others may like this film more and find it a lot deeper and moving. [Well-reviewed Drama].

141. **The High Note:** A semi-standard rom-com that stays afloat because Dakota Johnson is charming and Tracee Ellis Ross is a good actress. A supporting cast of Ice Cube, Eddie Izzard, and Bill Pullman also help. The music-industry plot and references might appeal to some. Otherwise this movies does little new. [NAACP – Best Actress Nominee], *HBOMax.*

140. **Judy and Punch:** The film has comical moments, that help cover up the familiar plot. Although the plot is a twist on class witch hunt films, the film does not do much with the premise. The plot is straightforward with simplistic characters and a fair bit of exposition. [AACTA – Best Picture Nominee], *Hulu.*

139. **The Personal History of David Copperfield:** A comedic and modern-ish adaptation of Dickens' novel *David Copperfield.* It is a great example of race-blind casting when adapting older stories; Dev Patel plays David Copperfield. The issue is that I despise Dickens and his novels (including the prose, themes, and plots). I have not read *Copperfield*, so I can not point out what is new and are changes, but at the end of the day, my dislike of the source material overrules most everything. Also the costumes and sets are good, but not that good. [British Independent – Best Screenplay].

Tier 11: A Bunch of Heart-warming Films and a Horror

138. **The King of Staten Island:** At two hours and seventeen minutes the films is simply too long. Given that it is high autobiographical, perhaps Pete Davidson could not be talked into shortening the film. Maybe, Judd Apatow the producer was unable to convince Judd Apatow the director to cut scenes. Perhaps Judd Apatow refused to cut scenes with his daughter (playing Davidson's younger sister). There are at least four subplots, and two of them needed to be cut. The film has some funny moments, and Davidson is better than expected. Yet the film suffers because no one was willing to touch Davidson's baby. [Critic's Choice – Best Comedy Nominee], *HBOMax.*

137. **Jingle Jangle: A Christmas Journey:** The film is straight-forward with simple characters, and more Christmas-adjacent than Christmas. Yet the cast is rather impressive (Forest Whitaker and Keegan-Micheal Key) for a Christmas movie, which helps. The song and dance numbers a decent enough. The strength of the film is in the costumes, sets, and some of the VFX. It is nothing special, but easily worth watching next winter if you haven't seen it already. [NAACP – Best Picture Nominee], *Netflix.*

136. **The Rental:** Dave Franco's directorial debut is standard cabin-in-the-woods fare. The film overly relies on frequent (bad) horror tropes (only in the final act are some tropes subverted, but by that point most interest has been lost). The underlying drama is too forced, and in-your-face. The cast does help: Dan Stevens (*The Guest*, *Beauty and the Beast*), Alison Brie (*Community*), Sheila Vand, and Jeremy Allen White. Dave Franco might have some good ideas, so do not rule his next film, but *The Rental* is very much a first attempt at film-making. [Critic's Choice – Best Horror Nominee].

135. **The Broken Hearts Gallery:** A mediocre rom-com, that is mainly elevated by Geraldine Viswanathan (*Blockers*, *Bad Education*). The plot is generic rom-com fare and does little to bring new ideas to the genre; perhaps the only benefit is a boyfriend who does not talk but is in scenes. Yet, unlike the silent boyfriend, a lot of other 'jokes' are forced and seem like deliberate pandering to a certain time of woke millennial; while running after someone, the lead stops to sign a petition for Planned Parenthood. This gag adds nothing to the film, is not that funny, and pure pandering. There are other examples of these forced jokes. [Well-reviewed Rom-com].

134. **All the Bright Places:** This Young Adult movie is held together by the great work of the two leads: Elle Fanning and Justice Smith (*Detective Pikachu*). Both of them are spectacular. It is directed by Brett Haley (*Hearts Beat Loud*, *The Hero*, *I'll See You In My Dreams*) – who directed the next film on this list – is making a nice career out of decent (and enjoyable, if albeit predictable) heart-warming and/or heart-breaking movies. [Elle Fanning in a Netflix YA Movie], *Netflix.*

133. **All Together Now:** An enjoyable-enough young adult film that is carried by Auli'i Cravalho (*Moana*) and directed by Brett Haley. The premise makes for a moving-enough film; homeless high school student who excels in school and is an overall good person. Some of the supporting cast are not used to their full potential, especially Carol Burnett and Fred Armisen. [Auli'i Cravalho in a Netflix YA Movie], *Netflix.*

132. **H is for Happiness:** Standard fare for a feel-good film. The film is quirky, but you can't help but wish it leaned into the quirkiness a little more, as it is a little uneven. You know what you are going to get, and yet, even knowing what is coming there are enough (minor) surprises and laughs that make it an enjoyable watch. [AACTA – Best Film Nominee], *Amazon Prime.*

131. **Misbehaviour:** A biopic that is too sprawling to ever fully come together. There are three separate plots: i) protesters at Miss World 1970, ii) the contestants of Miss World 1970, and iii) Bob Hope (and his wife) hosting Miss World 1970. The film would have been much better removing some of these plots and devoting time to character development. The cast is essentially wasted (Kiera Knightly, Jessie Buckley, Lesley Manville (who was especially great) etc). The end result is still feel-good, but the film could have been better. [Well-reviewed Film with Great Cast].

130. **The Willoughbys:** The film is silly fun (e.g., there is always a massive pileup in the background, Ricky Gervais voices the cat/narrator). The film aims low and is basic in its aim; finding a family. The characters are zany, with a great voice cast: Will Forte, Maya Rudolph, Terry Crews, Alessia Cara (who sings a nice original song), Martin Short, and Jane Krakowski. [Annie – Best Animated Film Nominee], *Netflix.*

129. **Onward:** One of Pixar's worst offerings (well, not *Cars 2* bad). The plot (minus the last fifteen minutes) is garbage. All possible plot points are conveniently elaborated with a new spell; need to reveal a hard truth? a spell that stops working if you lie!, need to have self-confidence? a spell that only works if you believe it is working!. The geography of the area is inconsistent. The only reason *Onward* ranks this high, is that the final fifteen minutes is rather good. [Oscars – Best Animated Film Nominee], *Disney+.*

128. **Love and Monsters:** For an extremely original idea – cold-blooded animals have changes to massive human-eating creatures causing an apocalypse – the film is somehow not original at all; the viewer is constantly reminded of *Zombieland*, *I am Legend*, *Lost*, and *Stand By Me*. The visuals are impressive, and worth the nominations. It is good family fun (you never face palm while watching), but you can't help but wish it was more original. [Oscars – Best Visual Effects Nominee].

Tier 10: Worthy Goals, Poor Execution

127. **Selah and the Spades:** An extremely difficult film to rank, in part because the film never decides quite what it wants to be; a mishmash of *Mean Girls* and *Heathers*; factions in an elite(?) prep school(? boarding school?) compete for power (while sharing power) and work together to throw parties with booze and weed and acid. Is it a critique of prep school culture? I don't think so. The co-leads are both African-American women, only adding to the confusion (historical elite prep schools are white, but the cast is rather diverse; really only one white student is a major character). The film is too uneven in the setup and the plot. Yet, Lovie Simone and Celeste O'Connor are both rather good and officially young actresses (of color) to watch. [Sundace – Innovator Award Nominee], *Amazon Prime.*

126. **I Care a Lot:** Rosamund Pike is good, not great; same goes from Peter Dinklage. The film has a decent enough idea, but the execution is horrible, especially in the second half of the film. The second half quickly becomes cliches and bad Bond movie tropes. The entire epilogue is pandering to a specific type of audience member. Also, the start of the film spends time establishing the grift/scam and not characters which then also hinders the second half. [Golden Globes – Best Actress in a Comedy/Musical], *Netflix.*

125. **The Trip to Greece:** The fourth (and potentially final) installment of the series, *Greece* follows true to form. This is perhaps the least-funny and least-food centric, but it is also the most serious.

This has been a fun series from Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon; you know exactly what you are getting when you start the movie and you always get it. Hopefully they keep making more. [Sequel], *Hulu*.

124. **True History of the Kelly Gang:** The strength of the film is the cast: George MacKay (*1917*), Russell Crowe, Nicholas Hoult (*The Favourite*), Thomasin McKenzie (*Leave No Trace*), Essie Davis (*The Babadook*). The direction is rather stylized, which in some scenes look amazing, and in others is simply distracting. The (fictionalized) biopic spends too much time 'developing' characters, but does so in a way that minimizes effectiveness. [AACTA – Best Film Nominee].

123. **The 24th:** A decent-enough historical drama about the (all-Black) 24th infantry's clash with white locals in 1917 Houston. However, the film has little character development (and has cheap effects at times). The plot is basic and predictable. It is a film that you wished had been better, but the storytelling is at a simplistic level. [NAACP – Outstanding Independent Feature Nominee].

122. **The Old Guard:** Although the action sequences are good, viewers can't help but wish they were watching *John Wick*, *Atomic Blonde*, or *The Equalizer*. Charlize Theron is rather good, but her character is not developed enough. The primary issue is that the plot, and the issues the film wants to discuss, never hit home. Too many plot points exist to advance the plot, not to provide character; and when they do add character development, said development is surface deep. [GLAAD – Best Wide Release Nominee], *Netflix*.

121. **The Lodge:** An okay horror who strength is the lead role played by Riley Keough (*Logan Lucky*, *It Comes at Night*, *The House that Jack Built*, *Under the Silver Lake*) who has put together a good collection, of mainly indie, roles. The primary issue with *Lodge* is that it doesn't know what type of horror it wants to be: post-trauma of being in a religious cult, off-medication, cabin fever, haunted house, revenge . . . Then it never figures out what it wants to say about religion (partially because the of the above themes that do not fully come together). A few times the rug is pulled out last minute, a few too many plot holes, and Chekhov's guns are everywhere (and, since the film hits too many tropes, one of these is a literal gun). [Well-reviewed Horror Film], *Hulu*.

120. **To All the Boys: P.S. I Still Love You:** Although some of the charm is there, the innovation that ranked the first film highly is lost. The additions of Holland Taylor (*Two and a Half Men*) and Jordan Fisher (*Liv and Maddie*). Also, I can't help but wish that Noah Centineo was not the main boyfriend, he constant teenage rom-com appearances are starting to be grating (especially when cast next to Jordan Fisher), or to quote me from last year, 'and although [Centineo] is decent; it appears his personality revolves around being tall. Society probably deserves it, after having decades of films where the female's character is being attractive.' [Sequel], *Netflix*.

119. **An American Pickle:** Seth Rogen is good in both of the leading roles. Though, when playing the elder Greenbaum, Rogen does veer into Borat-voice territory, which is hard to unhear. The film has some comedic moments, but could be funnier. The film itself works best a a criticism of millennial and woke culture. [Well-reviewed Comedy], *HBOMax*.

118. **Premature:** I wanted to like this film more as there a good underlying story with good acting by Zora Howard. However, the film because too upfront and preachy—unsubtle; a character is late and the given reason is a protest about a cop killing another black person; it then becomes a an argument over if black men or black women have it worse and it is not subtle at all. Another example is a forced discussion on if art should be political or simply exist. Each of these instances make good points, but they leave nothing to the imagination. For a slow-paced romance/drama film, it does not work. [Independent Spirit – John Cassavetes Award Nominee], *Hulu*.

117. **The Photograph:** A standard romance drama across two time periods. The earlier plot (with the mother) is not as good as the modern plot. The film is held together by the leads, Lakeith Stanfield

(*Short Term 12*) and Issa Rae, who are both rather good. The issue (besides the inferior 1980s plot) is mediocre writing. Plot points frequently hinge on the old trope of loving someone but wanting to get out of your home town/current job. There are a few superfluous characters (Chelsea Peretti as Stanfield's boss serves no purpose and could have been cut from the film). [NAACP – Best Actress Nominee], *HBOMax.*

116. **I'm Your Woman:** Rachel Brosnahan is good in the lead role, although at times she slips into her Mrs. Maisel voice and it distracts from her performance. The primary issue is that the film is a standard entry in a growing genre: wife is left behind after husband leaves and needs to learn to fend for herself. The crime aspect is a nice touch, but the film does not make full use of the concept. The set pieces from the 70s are good, but are not great. [Well-reviewed Drama], *Amazon Prime.*

Tier 9: Not Much Bad, But Not Much That Stands Out

115. **Blood on Her Name:** A simplistic tale about the lengths a mother would go to protect her family (all while having a conscious). There is some character development (not much) and the plot feels rather familiar. Yet, at under 90 minutes there is enough suspense and action that the film is an okay watch. [Well-reviewed Thriller].

114. **A Shaun the Sheep Movie: Farmaggedon:** The claymation is good, not great, as with the first *Shuan the Sheep* movie from Aardman. The plot is rather basic, and often times overly reliant on sci-fi homages. Yet with the amount of homages you'd half exact it to be a satire. [Oscar – Best Animated Film Nominee], *Netflix.*

113. **Let Him Go:** The strength of the film is the cast: Kevin Costner, Diane Lane, and Lesley Manville with Jeffery Donovan and Booboo Stewart (*The Descendants* franchise) rounding the film out. The plot is basic, Costner and Lane go to get their grandchild away from its new (abusive) family. The character development isn't there, but the cast makes it forgivable. Also, the landscape shots are rather good; some of the best of the year. [Well-reviewed Thriller Film].

112. **Greyhound:** Tom Hanks stars in a script he wrote about the Battle of the Atlantic. At 90 minutes long, the film is well paced and packed with action. That is the selling point: short, tight, and thrilling. That is where the good items end. The character development is essentially non-existent. The VFX are iffy at times: the ships are well done, but the water is not. [Oscars – Best Sound Nominee], *Apple TV+.*

111. **I Used to Go Here:** Gillian Jacobs (*Community*) is a new author who goes back to her alma mater to give a book talk; the plot is entirely predictable. The lack of originality is annoying, literally every trope you can think of is in the film. The only reason the film ranks this high is that Gillian Jacobs is good, although she is essentially playing a similar to character as Britta from *Community*. [Well-reviewed Comedy], *HBOMax.*

110. **The Banker:** A standard African-American biopic in the vein of *Just Mercy* and *Marshall*. The film does not add much new to the genre, but does have good performances by Anthony Mackie, Samuel L Jackson, and Nicholas Hoult. Those three do a lot of the heavy lifting, as you can't help but wish the film was more serious/grim. [NAACP – Outstanding Independent Film Winner], *Apple TV+.*

109. **The Devil All The Time:** The lengthy and impressive cast is the reason to watch. Tom Holland is rather good. Robert Pattinson is rather good as well. Eliza Scanlen is good. The film wants to be a sprawling yet interconnected look at the various evils committed by humans. However the slogging (two hours and twenty minutes) plot lacks character development; yes people do bad things, but the why is rarely addressed. Instead the film appears to be a collection of vignettes that are put

together. The quality of the cast really saves the film. The production values are rather good as well. You can't help but think it would have worked better as an eight episode miniseries; allowing for the development of the multiple characters. [Good Cast], *Netflix*.

108. **Host:** A brisk 60 minute minute movie about a group of friends holding a Zoom seance during lockdown. The premise is good; the film looks like a Zoom meeting, and due to lockdown actors needs to learn to do some of the effects and camera work. From a production standpoint, the film is impressive. Yet that is where the accolades end. The film quickly turns into a generic jump scare movie with little in the way of character development. However, at 60 minutes and a unique production, it still is worth seeing. [Well-reviewed Horror Film].

107. **Nomadland:** This film is not that good. How it was an Award frontrunner, is baffling—actually no, the film is the perfect example not-condescending-toward-working-class-people-examination-of-working-class-people film that Hollywood has wanted to exalt for years. This film is the equivalent of the New York Times interviewing people eating at an Ohio diner; award voters and critics can feel good about getting to understand 'real Americans'. Yet, the film beats you in the face with its anti-capitalist and anti-consumerism messages. The film is as subtle as crashing through a coffee table. Chloe Zhao (*Songs My Brother Taught Me*, and *The Rider*) is a one-trick pony; she gets great performances out of non-professional actors and relies on beautifully shot landscapes, but almost always puts together a film that is too slow and doesn't achieve what it sets out to do. The film isn't interesting in examining the Nomad life, but using it to give an angry rant about consumerism: a character goes to the hospital and is out a minute later; no mention of billing, or payment, or debt; a cop(? security guard) knocks on the van saying she can't park there overnight, nothing else happens, but you do get long shots of the van on country roads. *All the Bright Places* was a better look at living out of a van, and that was a YA movie. *Nomadland* is not very good; I liked it the first time I saw it with Chris Farley in the leading role. [Oscars – Best Picture Nominee], *Hulu*.

106. **Blood Quantum:** One of the most original films of the year; a zombie movie, but now Native Americans are immune from bites. And yet sadly, the film never does much with this premise. Instead the film bogs down with bad dialogue, poor acting (which is surprising as many cast members have been in other films). The, and perhaps most annoying, is the film is filled with zombie movie tropes. Writer-director Jeff Barnaby shows promise, but the film is never as good as the premise. [Well-reviewed Horror Film].

105. **Porno:** A fun B-movie, but it does not make full use of its premise: (religious) teens working a movie theater stumble upon a satanic film after closing. The film could have been a religious parody and explored sexuality more (*Yes, God, Yes* later on the list achieves both of these). [Well-reviewed Horror Film].

104. **12 Hour Shift:** A funny-enough dark comedy about stealing organs while working as a nurse. There is enough character development to keep the film from flopping, though more would have been appreciated. The main issue is that the film isn't funny enough to be very good, nor is the pacing where it should be. The film doesn't drag, but there is more down time than there should be (a meta explanation of downtime during a 12 hour shift doesn't quite apply). The cast is decent, but in the hands of better actors this could have been much better (there a role perfect for Margot Robbie in a similar vein to Harley Quinn). [Well-reviewed Horror Film], *Hulu*.

103. **The Dark and the Wicked:** Written and directed by Bryan Bertino (*The Monster*), the film relies too much used horror tropes to build tension (e.g., chopping vegetables and 'Let's Split Up Gang'). The film also wants to say something about fear of death and grief, but any message because extremely muddled. Most messages are muddled in the film; there was a Christianity vs atheism

theme but that was muddled. There is an argument that the film is a giant nothing-matters-we-all-die message, yet even if that is the case, there are better ways of portraying that type of dread. [Well-reviewed Horror Film].

102. **Buffaloed:** Zoey Deutch is the reason to watch this film. She holds the movie together with her wit, charm, and humor. The frequent use of Buffalo (the city) is good enough, but at times comes across as what a non-Buffalonian thinks of Buffalo; and could have made better use of being set in Buffalo (rather than filming in Toronto). The preaching regarding debt and debt collection is over the top at times. [Well-reviewed Comedy], *Hulu.*

Tier 8: A Lengthy Tier of Perfectly Average Films (That Span All Genres and Reasons for Being Perfectly Average) – All Of Which Are Now Worth Watching

101. **Tenet:** By know we know what we are getting with a Christopher Nolan: a well-shot spectacle, with little character development that screams psuedo-intellectualism. Nolan films are the bell-curve meme: tails, 'this is dumb'; with the center, 'omg this is genius.' For some of the fight sequences, you can't help but remember *John Wick* did it better. However the car chases are great spectacle. The sound is a little too much. [Oscars – Best Visual Effects Nominee].

100. **VFW:** A fun B-movie. There is gore, outlandish ways of killing people, and enough character development that keeps the film from being brain dead. A group of veterans need to defend their bar after a girl hides away at the bar due to stealing drugs to get revenge on the person who killed her sister. The film could do more with the premise of its veterans but, again, it is B-movie fun. [Well-reviewed Horror Film].

99. **1BR:** A nice horror film, which makes writer/director David Marmor as someone to watch. The film wants to make statements about individuality/loneliness vs community (and the subsequent movement in society to a more individualistic one), and others (that I wont mention for risk of spoilers); future films could put these ideas together in a better way. The lead, Nicole Brydon Bloom, could be worth watching as well. [Well-reviewed Horror Film], *Netflix.*

98. **Shirley:** Directed by Josephine Decker (*Madeline's Madeline*), who is establishing herself as making interesting films. Held together by the two leads, Elisabeth Moss and Odessa Young (*The Daughter*) the film avoids a lot of potential pitfalls. In particular, the film starts off as a mediocre re-imagining of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, but is able to add enough differences (though it doesn't fully escape *Woolf's* shadow). [Sundance – Special Jury Award], *Hulu.*

97. **Bad Education:** Hugh Jackman plays a superintendent of a rising-in-the-ranks school district. Based on a true story (with a fair bit of artistic license; some good for pacing, others a little too on-the-nose) of the largest fraud in US-public-school history. But the film isn't overly procedural in the uncovering of the fraud; it focuses on the lives of the fraudsters. Yet, the characters of the fraudsters are not developed, their motivation for the fraud seem to be either [very Mr. Krab's voice] 'I like money' or 'because I could' neither of which makes for a compelling character. [GLAAD – Best TV Movie], *HBOMax.*

96. **Over the Moon:** The first twenty minutes of the animated film (on Earth) is bad. The viewer needs to slug through it (sets up an extremely cliche – and predictable – plot, with an annoying emphasis on making a Chinese folktale real; which when set in a 'normal' looking modern society does not work. Animation can change the make up of the world, to make folktales seem real, but when the world looks life-like, that disconnect hurts; the moon does not change phases because of a space dog. However, when the film reaches the moon, the animation becomes amazing. The animation is the best part of the film, even if it verges on wannabe-Disney movie at times (Netflix production). It

does contain the best pop song in an animated film (better than *Zootopia*'s song). The beautiful animation helps overcome most of the flaws. [Oscars – Best Animated Film Nominee], *Netflix*.

95. **Luxor:** The film does feel slow even at 90 minutes, yet it ends up being a lovely look a the rekindling of an old flame. The main character, played by Andrea Riseborough, is given a lot of depth and complexity; all with little dialogue. The characters (re)actions and Riseborough's acting provide the great characterization. Riseborough has put together a great string of films: *Birdman*, *Nocturnal Animals*, *Mindhorn*, *The Death of Stalin*, *Mandy*, *Nancy* and *Burden*, yet has not received a *major* acting nomination. She deserves a film that can showcase her talents. [British Independent – Best Actress Nominee], *Amazon Prime*.

94. **Ammonite:** The second feature by Frances Lee, who needs to be discussed, for reasons good and bad. Their debut, *God's Own Country* was a 'slower, not-at-good English-countryside *Brokeback Mountain*'. The entire time you wished you were watching *Brokeback* instead. Now, *Ammonite* was a slower, not-as-good English-seaside *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. Lee is not making bad films, but the films are essentially remakes of (much) better LGBT films. Hopefully their third film will be more original. All of that said Kate Winslet and Saoirse Ronan were good, but not that great (which, could be due to the easy comparison to *Portrait*). [GLAAD – Best Limited Release Nominee], *Hulu*.

93. **The Boys in the Band:** An adaptation of the 2018 Broadway revival of the 1968 play, which was also adapted into a film in 1970 (I have not seen the 1970 film). Yet, the primary issue of the film is in the first sentence; it fifty years old. The film is dated. What was a momentous achievement in 1970 is now a film with characters that exist to serve the role of various 1970 gay stereotypes. In 2020, there are simply better films with gay characters. However, the cast is comprised entirely of openly gay actors, and the actors are good. Jim Parsons (*The Big Bang Theory*) is especially good in the lead role. [GLAAD – Best Limited Release Winner], *Netflix*.

92. **Farewell Amor:** It is nearly impossible to not compare *Amor* to a film later down the list, *Minari*. Both are about the struggles of immigrant families in America. *Amor* takes the unique twist that the husband and father had been living in NYC for many years (working as a taxi driver) before his wife and daughter were able to legally immigrate. However, the film does not exactly work because the character of the wife/mother is bad. Her character is essentially being annoyingly religious; not wanting to retain her African culture—annoyingly religious. Though the film attempts the painfully obvious redemption of the character in the third act, it does not exactly work. The film could have been a lot better with a better written character. Ekwa Msangi directed a well-made film and hopefully her next project keeps up her good work. [National Board of Review – Top Ten Independent Film], *Hulu*.

91. **Words on Bathroom Walls:** A deeper-than-expected YA film about schizophrenia. The film still has its share of cliches and predictability, but most can be written off given the quality of Charlie Plummer (*Lean on Pete*). The film does balance humor, romance, and the seriousness of the illness, to produce a good-enough movie. Well-review Film] *Amazon Prime*.

90. **The Mauritanian†:** We need more films about Guantanamo Bay and the torture conducted by the United States. Yet this film is far too procedural to truly hit home. *The Report* made a lot of the same statements and did them better. Much of the film is bogged down in needless lawyer-client meetings. Tahar Rahim was good as well, Jodie Foster was decent enough, Shailene Woodley's character isn't given much depth. and Benedict Cumberbatch does some sort of accent. [BAFTA – Best Film Nominee].

89. **The Nest:** Written and directed by Sean Durkin (*Martha Marcy May Marlene*) the issue with the film is that you've seen it a million times: set in the 80s, a man working in finance – living it up but barely paying the bills – and the family he has at home. The cinematography is good (lots of shots

with the action in the background), with good production design; the house is a character. Yet, it does not matter how good Jude Law and Carrie Coon (*Gone Girl*, *The Post*, *Widows*), you have seen this movie before and there simply isn't enough new to elevate it higher. [National Board of Review – Top 10 Independent Film].

88. **Hunter Hunter:** A horror/thriller film that is more thriller than horror (not many scares, and also the tension isn't exactly there for most of the film). The film does a good job of keeping the plot minimal while still having enough surprises. More character development would have helped improve the film. The woodland images were rather good. [Well-reviewed Horror Film], *Hulu*.

87. **A Rainy Day in New York:** Written and directed by Woody Allen (*Annie Hall*, possibly sexually assaulting his own daughter; and the reason the film's US release was delayed), the film is pure Allen rom-com; if a perfectly average work. Elle Fanning and Selena Gomez (*Wizards of Waverly Place*) are both great. Timothee Chalamet, is decent but does not fully pull off the standard Allen lead male; the film is mainly a retreading of common Allen themes. The lighting is a tad too harsh/in-your-face at times, and that distracts. However it is always great to see lengthy scenes, the walk-and-talk, and other Allen staples. The dialouge is not as good as previous Allen films, is often too on-the-nose, but contains enough witticisms to be mildly funny. Some of the negative reviews for the film are probably more about Allen's personal life, and not eh quality of the film. [Great Cast], *Amazon Prime.*

86. **Come to Daddy:** Elijah Wood (*Over the Garden Wall*) is a son that reunites with his father. What follows is a funny thriller/horror. Wood is perfect as the son wanting to reconnect with the father that abandoned him as a child. Though the film drags at first, it is needed to set up the thriller/horror elements that follow. There is enough character develop and themes that results in a quality film. [Well-reviewed Horror Film], *Amazon Prime.*

85. **Get Duked!:** A funny-enough semi-thriller set in the Scottish Highlands. The film excels as a British social commentary, some of which might have been lost on me, but most of the general themes about class/land ownership and the recent waves of Middle Eastern immigrants work well. Most of the humor is dry, as you'd expect. It is a fun film with enough social commentary to elevate the film, even if the humor is too absurdist at times. [Well-reviewed Comedy/Horror], *Amazon Prime.*

84. **Extra Ordinary:** Another amusing horror-comedy film. The cast is solid: Maeve Higgins, Barry Ward, and Will Fotre. The film has its funny moments, some of which are a tad predictable, though most are absurdest in nature, 'Do you ever have nightmares after eating cheese? You might've eaten a ghost. Even the weakest ghosts can possess cheese quite easily! Due to the living bacteria in the cheese.' Horror-comedy, when done well-enough, is always a good watch. [Well-reviewed Comedy/Horror].

83. **Freaky:** A third straight horror-comedy, it is ranked the highest primarily because of the cast; Vince Vaughn and Kathryn Newton (*Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* and *Blockers*) are both great. The premise is simple, *Freaky Friday* but instead of switching bodies with your mother, you – the shy-but-hot-girl-with-a-crush-on-the-football-player – switched bodies with the town serial killer. There is enough gender and racial commentary to elevate the film. *Freaky* is probably the least funny of the three and the most homage-y/parody; the leads really do set it apart. [Critic's Choice – Best Horror Film Nominee].

82. **Rocks:** A good film about childhood poverty and the forced coming-of-age that results from being housing insecure. The diverse (non-professional) teenagers are all much better than anticipated, however some reviews are probably overly laudatory. The plot verges on predictability, but even when predictable the characters are driving the action (and even at 90 minutes, the film seems slow at times). The dialogue is in the style of Robert Altman with characters constantly talking over each

other and at once (the sound mixing does not help here either). [BAFTA – Outstanding British Film Nominee], *Netflix*.

81. **The Beach House:** Similar to *The Rental* in the sense they are both horror films with small casts set in a beach-side vacation/rental home. The primary issue the the film does not hide its premise well enough; something in the ocean was released. The film would have been improved by keeping items obscure. However, as a debut from writer–director Jeffery A. Brown, it was a solid effort. [Well-reviewed Film].

80. **Enola Holmes:** Your enjoyment of *Enola* is going to come down to if Millie Bobby Brown and Henry Cavill's charms outweigh the multiple head palm moments. The character of Mycroft is especially awful, the theme of woman's liberation is almost always too heavy-handed. The mystery is rather easily solved, once most of the clues are laid out. The VFX (particularly background buildings in 1800s London) are cheap. Yet, Millie Bobby Brown steals almost every scene she is in; when paired with Cavill's they match wits each time and complement each other perfectly. But, given the multiple flaws, *Enola* could easily rank a tier lower. [Well-reviewed Film], *Netflix*.

79. **Anything for Jackson:** A fresher take on the conjuring-Satan genre of horror films; two grandparents attempt to bring their grandson (the titular Jackson) back to life, by having Jackson's spirit enter a pregnant mother's unborn baby. The grandparents, played by Sheila McCarthy and Julian Richings (both of whom are rather good), adds a new wrinkle to the genre and allows for solid character development. The film does not quite pull off its final act, but is still a good horror film. [Well-reviewed Horror Film].

78. **Color Out of Space:** A visually stunning sci-fi/horror film adapted from a Lovecraft short story. Nicolas Cage gives a truly Nicolas Cage bizzaro performance that is hilarious, over-the-top. and amazing to watch. It sad that Cage has lots of debts, but it means he takes on these role and crushes them. Except, at the end of the day, the film doesn't have much to say (an environmental theme can be taken away, but it is weak). A deeper film would rank higher. [Well-reviewed Sci-fi/Horror Film].

77. **A Good Woman is Hard to Find:** A thriller take on the meek-woman-finding-herself genre. Within that genre, a lot of the material is refreshed, and depending on how unoriginal you view the premise probably could put the film in a lower tier (or a higher tier). The thriller element (which could have been done a tad better) is the real innovation, and it goes in a unique direction. The star is Sarah Bolger (*Emelie*) who carries and elevates the film. [Well-reviewed Thriller].

76. **Hearts and Bones:** The film bites off more than it can chew (especially regarding the various husband-and-wife subplots). The film works best as two new friends who bond over wartime trauma (one being a photographer, the other a refugee from Sudan); the male vulnerability and friendship is rather good. The two friends are played by Hugo Weaving and Andrew Luri (film debut) who are both good. There are a few forced twists and turns that also could have been avoided, or better incorporated. Overall the film is still a good look at trauma. [AACTA – Best Actor Nominee].

75. **Perfect 10:** It does not break any new ground in the coming-of-age genre, and borders on predictability at times. There is enough character development that there is a sweet film here. Frankie Box and Alfie Deegan are rather good in their film debuts; both are worth watching in the future. Eva Riley is also in her directorial debut. This film doesn't break new ground, but does showcase new talent. [British Independent Film – Best Debut Director Nominee].

74. **The White Tiger**[†]**:** The film is a more accurate *Slumdog Millionaire*; it isn't poverty-porn, but a realistic life at inequality and corruption in India. The exact-premise of the film serves to provide a way for plot advancement (writing a letter to the then-leader of China). The film straddles the line between drama and comedy/satire; yet the comedy rarely lands and the drama is not that

captivating. The realism is the primary draw. Adarsh Gourav is the breakthrough star int he leading role and hopefully he gets more roles in the future. [Oscars – Best Adapted Screenplay Nominee], *Netflix*.

73. **Unpregnant:** The first of many abortion-oriented films on the list. The film takes a decidedly comedic (and at times formulaic) road-trip movie stance. There are laughs, and Haley Lu Richardson (*The Edge of Seventeen*, *Columbus*, and *Support the Girls*) is great as always in the lead role. Had the film deviated from the formula a bit more this could have ranked higher, though the more absurdest and simplistic approach still puts a cap on how high the film could rank. The other abortion films are much better. [GLAAD – Best TV Movie Nominee], *HBOMax*.

72. **News of the World:** Technically well made, the location shots are beautiful. Tom Hanks is good, but his character needed more. Helena Zengel is a breakout young performer (12 years old) it will be fun watching what she does next; an argument can be made she out acted Tom Hanks. The issue is the film never decided what it wanted to say (and had underdeveloped characters); the film seemed to want to be an analysis of character with two conflicting/opposite personality traits: Hanks' was a confederate soldier yet is well read; Zengel's was raised by natives but was born to German parents. There is little that is bad, yet almost nothing to elevate the film. [Oscars – Best Cinematography Nominee].

Tier 7: Feminism (and Other Films); Most of Which Could Have Been Easily Improved

71. **Scare Me:** An original take on telling ghost/horror stories around the fire. The works best on deconstructing various horror tropes and changes in the genre; especially the move from dated jump scares to slow burning psychological horror (as someone who has been championing horror films for years, I loved the meta view). As with a meta take on horror, the film is complete with modern gender themes that helps to provide some 'scares' (the film itself is not very scary, it is more of a comedy). For horror fans it is a great watch. The film also features some of the best sound editing of the year, I am almost shocked it didn't pick up any sound nominations. [Well-reviewed Horror Film].

70. **Kindred:** A slow-burn horror film that relies much too much on tropes: a combination of *Rosemary's Baby* and *Get Out*. The gaslighting(?) of a pregnant woman has been done before, and the film is rather iffy about whether the main character is crazy or being gaslit (but not in a way that builds suspense or confusion; rather what seemed easiest at the time). You can't help but wish the film did more with its premise (here the pregnant mother is a black immigrant among the British upper class). [Well-reviewed Horror Film], *Hulu*.

69. **Dating Amber:** The film takes an overused premise; a (lesbian) girl dates a (gay, but does not fully realize it) boy, so that they both can fit in at school. The film almost overcomes the familiar preference, as it instead focuses on self-acceptance and friendship. Lola Petticrew is good as the titular Amber. The film also has enough developed supporting characters (e.g., parents potentially nearing a divorce) also help overcome the premise. Yet, all of these do combine for a fun- and easy-watching rom-com. [Well-reviewed Rom-Com], *HBOMax*.

68. **Le Leyenda Negra:** The film is a little too upfront with its anti-Trump (immigration) stance (as well as general wokeness) and that is the main knock on the film. Yet there is also a sweet tale of friendship and love (which also partially goes off-the-rails due to the immigration stance). Hopefully both Monica Betancourt and Kailei Lopez get future roles as both were rather good. [Independent Spirit – John Cassavetes Award Nominee], *HBOMax*.

67. **To the Stars:** A late 50s/early 60s period piece in small town Oklahoma, the film makes good use of the location setting with good costumes, sets, and cars. Kara Hayward (*Moonrise Kingdom*) and Liana Liberato (mentioned below in *Banana Split*) are both rather good. Liberato is especially enjoyable, with her collection of films this year she is someone to watch going forward. Hopefully she gets bigger roles soon. The film would rank a tier or two higher, except the last thirty-or-so minutes verges too heavily into cliche and recycled plot line territory. However first hour-and-a-half bring enough new ideas to the genre. [Sundance – Grand Jury Prize Nominee], *Hulu.*

66. **Banana Split:** An end-of-High-School female-buddy film, in the vein of *Booksmart* (it is no where near as good, but if it gets you to watch. . .). The film is carried by the two leads, Hannah Marks (*I Used to Go Here,*; who co-wrote) and Liana Liberato (*To the Stars*, *The Beach House*). It is a fun and easy watch. [Well-reviewed Comedy], *Netflix.*

65. **Top End Wedding:** An Australian rom-com set in the Northern Territory; which has a large aboriginal population, which is at the heart of the film (and its standard premise): woman is a big lawyer in the city, and never got in touch with her roots. She and her fiance go back 'home' to get married, oh, and to find her mother who has disappeared. What follows is a rather funny and emotional journey. Miranda Tapsell who co-wrote and stared in the film is someone to watch. [AACTA – Best Picture Nominee], *Hulu.*

64. **Synchronic:** From the team of Justin Benson and Aaron Moorhead (*The Endless*, *Spring*), they are consistently turning out good films. The film could have made slightly better use of its sci-fi plot (a designer drug takes users back in time). Anthony Mackie is good, and the heart of the film is a solid friendship drama. This is a calling card of Benson and Moorhead; sci-fi/horror premise but centered around relationships. [Critic's Choice – Best Sci-fi Movie Nominee], *Netflix.*

63. **Borat Subsequent Moviefilm:** Still hilarious, though some of the raunchiness has been toned down (which makes for a less funny, but more impactful film). While the original was a great expose on the underbelly of America (and the helpfulness of Americans), this film is a direct shot Republicans (conspiracy theorists, sexists, racists; to name a few). The breakthrough is Maria Bakalova, whose portrayal of Borat's daughter adds another layer of humanism, feminism, and comedy. [Oscars – Best Supporting Actress Nominee], *Amazon Prime.*

62. **Emma.:** A fun adaptation of the Jane Austen novel. The costumes are lovely, as well as the sets; though you can't help but wish they made better use of the sets. The shots of the English countryside are rather good as well (reminiscent of *Barry Lyndon*). Anya Taylor-Joy is rather good, as with a fun supporting cast; Mia Goth (*Suspiria*, *High Life*), was particularly fun. However, at the end of the day, the film isn't particular great or special. [Oscars – Best Costume Nominee], *HBOMax.*

61. **Birds of Prey (and the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn):** In many ways *Prey* is a ripoff of *Deadpool*, but the formula still works and is fresh enough. *Prey* also makes all of the comments on feminism that *Wonder Woman* wanted to, but was unable; 'want a hair tie?', Harley having a tampon in her pocket when searched. This is a fun film, Margot Robbie is rather good as well. [Well-reviewed Superhero Film], *HBOMax.*

60. **Blow the Man Down:** A very good cast, with Margo Martindale giving a great performance in a supporting role. The film a simple (women-led) small-town murder cover up, filled out enough character development to round out the film. The plot is muddled at times, and borders on overly complex and underdeveloped for brief stretches; though by the end the viewer are easily able to piece everything together. Yet, you can't help but wish a few plot points were elaborated on. In all, it is a delightful film about women sticking together and helping each other out. June Squibb (*Nebraska*) plays one of the women, and she put in a sneaky good year: with small roles in *Soul* and *Palm Springs*. [Independent Spirit – Best First Screenplay Nominee], *Amazon Prime.*

59. **The Invisible Man:** A nice (and modern) adaptation of the classic film (though the trend of SF Tech Villains is getting to be annoying; the real villains of the tech industry are single family housing and Prop 13), directed by Leigh Whannell (*Upgrade*). Elizabeth Moss is great as always (especially in this type of mental breakdown role). The sets are nice, but it was not filmed in the Bay Area; a detail attentive viewers can pick up on. *Invisible Man* is what more mainstream films should aim to be. [AACTA – Best Picture Nominee], *HBOMax*.

58. **Happiest Season:** The film is completely held together by the cast: Kristen Stewart, Mackenzie Davis, Allison Brie, Aubrey Plaza, Dan Levy, Victor Garber, and Mary Steenburgen. You know the film will eventually reach a climactic dinner-party-gone-wrong scene and it does, but it does not deliver. The film could have been much better, but wastes much of the potential. It is still a decent a heart-warming holiday film. [GLAAD – Best Wide Release Winner], *Hulu*.

57. **On the Rocks:** There are two reasons to watch this film: i) Bill Murray, and ii) Rashida Jones. Both are a delight and hold the movie together. Everything else is rather basic, and retreads of is-he-cheating-or-is-he-not stories. A lesser cast and this film ranks much lower, most other actors weaseling out of running a red light would be a face palm moment of stupidity, yet with Murray it is charming and you let it slide. [Critic's Choice – Best Supporting Actor], *Apple TV+*.

56. **Spontaneous:** The film easily has one of the most darkly-unique premises of the year; students at a high school spontaneously combust. The film does a great job with the dark comedy, and the idea that you might die tomorrow (I do wonder if some reviews were overly generous given the release during the pandemic). Both Katherine Langford (*Knives Out*) and Charlie Plummer (*Lean on Pete*, *Words on Bathroom Walls*) are rather good. The film can also be viewed as a school shooting film given some of the subtext, but it does not fully lean into that interpretation. [Well-reviewed Comedy], *Hulu*.

55. **Saint Frances:** The film is good, especially the premise (one can't help but wonder how much better it would be with an all-star cast). *Frances* is another entry in a growing list of abortion-positive and period-positive film, this entry being more of a comedy-drama. The film does have a subplot or two that do not mix with the entire film (the guitar lessons being the primary offender), but this is writer Kelly O'Sullivan first feature (she is also the lead role). [Independent Spirit – John Cassavetes Award Nominee].

Tier 6: Decent Movies that Lacked the Special Sauce

54. **The Outpost:** A technically amazing war movie. The sound is great, there are multiple lengthy shots, rather than quick cutting normally seen in a war movie. This is most likely a top five Afghan/Iraq War movie (*The Hurt Locker*, *The Messenger*, *Zero Dark Thirty*, and *American Sniper* are the ones that have a case for being better, and *Sniper* and I am not convinced is better). The realism (one soldier even plays themselves) and attention to detail on the sets is rather good as well. Perhaps the greatest weakness of the film is that it doesn't know exactly what it wanted to say about the Afghan War, it treads the line between the situation was awful and soldiers are heros who sacrificed themselves for the greater good. [National Board of Review – Top Ten Independent Film], *Netflix*.

53. **The Way Back:** A film that could easily fall into cliches and tropes, but manages to avoid (most of) them and ends up as a rather good film. Ben Affleck carries the film, and is perfect in the role of an alcoholic who is asked to fill as the basketball coach for his former high school. It avoids peaked-in-high-school characters, and instead slowly reveals the full reasons for the character's drinking. Some of the basketball sequences could have been better, but this complaint is nitpicking as you'd need to watch a lot of basketball to pick up on some of the issues (how to call time out, for example). [Critic's Choice – Best Actor Nominee].

52. **Minor Premise:** The film is a solid sci-fi film, with an academic-driven look at what constitutes a personality (the academic framing could bias my rating upwards). There are a few potential plot holes that keep the film from ranking any higher. It is Eric Schultz's directorial debut, with a script he co-wrote; he could be worth keeping an eye on. [Well-reviewed Sci-fi Film].

51. **Black Bear:** Lead by Aubrey Plaza, who is rather good and probably deserved slightly more recognition for her performance (not Oscar-worthy, but still rather good). Unfortunately, it is difficult to get into the film with much in the way of spoilers. Though, the film leaves items ambiguous and open to multiple interpretations. [Sundance – NEXT Nominee].

50. **Kajillionaire:** Is oddly quirky (and not in a Wes Anderson way), but the tone is uneven and never completely lands (one reason why some people love this film, and other absolutely hate it). The film also has pacing issues, there are almost two climaxes, or one climax and a lengthy epilogue. Evan Rachel Wood plays almost too stilted of a character, whereas Gina Rodriguez is rather good in a supporting role. The film does come together nicely at the end, making it a worthwhile watch, but it might not be for everyone. [GLAAD – Best Limited Release Nominee].

49. **Bull:** A difficult film to rank as, in many ways, it is a straight-forward combination of *The Wrestler* and *The Rider* (yes, these Film X meets Film Y are often cliche, but here the parallels are too much to overcome to rank higher; *The Wrestler* is far superior, while *The Rider* is about as good). Rob Morgan (*Mudbound*, *The Last Black Man in San Fransisco*) is rather good and probably deserved more acclaim than he received. Amber Havard is a young actress to watch, she was rather good in what seems to be her debut. The film is a good look at the struggling working class in America, in a touching-enough – albeit done before. [Independent Spirit – Best Actor Nominee], *Hulu.*

48. **Charm City Kings:** The film is a nice coming-of-age in Baltimore. The setting of Baltimore is rather good, except throughout the film the viewer can't help but wish they were watching season four of *The Wire*; the themes and characters are too similar. And, *The Wire* is the greatest show of all time. It difficult to overcome the comparisons. However, the cast is rather good (Meek Mill has a supporting role) and even if the film gets cliche at times it stays true to its characters enough to be a solid film. [Sundace – Grand Jury Prize Nominee], *HBOMax.*

47. **Sylvie's Love:** Both Tessa Thompson (*Annihilation*) and Nnamdi Asomugha (The Oakland Raiders and *Crown Heights*) are great actors and delightful to watch together. Lesser actors and *Sylvie* does not rank here. The costumes and sets are good, one anachronism that I enjoyed was the brand new Le Creuset dutch oven on a 1960s tv show. One item the film excels at is having important statements about feminism and the African-American experience, as complements to the love story; the film is a love story, but the social importance provides depth to the characters and films. [NAACP Image – Outstanding TV Movie], *Amazon Prime.*

46. **Uncle Frank:** The film does veer closely into cliche and retreads (especially in regards to coming out), yet the cast is able to lift up the film. Paul Bettany and Sophia Lillis (*It*) are great as the leads. Margo Martingale, Judy Greer, Stephen Root, Lois Smith, Peter Macdissi, and Steve Zahn help round out a great cast. One benefit of the film, is that by also centering the film on Lillis' character (partially) coming-of-age helps add depth to the film. [GLAAD – Outstanding TV Movie Winner], *Amazon Prime.*

45. **Mogul Mowgli:** Riz Ahmed (*Sound of Metal*, *The Night Of*, *Venom*) is rather good. Except, the film is a worse *Sound of Metal* (which will be included later down on this list). That while watching this film, you can't help but think of Riz Ahmed playing essentially the same role in a better film and a film in which he gave a better performance. None of this is to say *Mowgli* is bad, it simply feels out. It does allow Ahmed to showcase his rap talents, and the film does have good points about being

Pakistani in England and Muslim in America; the reason the film ranks here (along with Ahmed's performance). [BAFTA – Outstanding British Film Nominee].

44. **Bait:** A solid experimental film (not as experimental as Malick; the film is semi-easy to follow), the editing is rather good, with longer spells of no dialogue. It is a great look at gentrification and goods vs services industries in a small Cornish (fishing) village. There characters are well-made and complex (and this is done with little dialogue; what dialogue is in the film helps with the characterization). The black and white cinematography looks good, though shot on 16mm and hand processed, there are lots of scratches (some may find this endearing, it comes off as distracting). [British Independent Film – Best Director Nominee].

43. **Calm with Horses:** Released in the United States as *The Shadow of Violence*, the film is in many ways a standard gangster film; man is conflicted between his job and family. What elevates the film, besides some well-edited sequences and a few nice shots, is the acting. Cosmo Jarvis (*Lady Macbeth*) is amazing, and there is one particular (and lengthy scene) that he delivers a masterclass performance. If the film was not a mildly-obscure British film, he most likely gets more recognition. Barry Keoghan (*Trespass Against Us*, *The Killing of the Sacred Deer*, *Dunkirk*, and *American Animals*) continues to put together a string a solid performances. [BAFTA – Oustanding British Film Nominee], *Netflix*.

42. **The Vast of Night:** Written and directed by Andrew Patterson in his film debut (the film was financed for work he did for the Oklahoma City Thunder). The cinematography is great, multiple lengthy tracking shots (including one particular stand out), and long (uncut) scenes. The subtle nod to Rod Sterling by naming the New Mexican town Cayuga was a fun Easter egg. Sierra McCormick (*A.N.T. Farm*) is good in one of the leads. Though the ending feels a tad underwhelming, the quality of everything else in the production carries the film. [Independent Spirit – Best First Screenplay Nominee], *Amazon Prime*.

41. **Sometimes Always Never:** Bill Nighy is absolutely delightful in this quirky, and funny, family drama. For some the quirks may not work, but the rear projection for driving scenes is pure fun and lightens what is a moving film about a father and son dealing with the disappearance of their son/brother. The secondary characters are given enough to round out the film. While the focus on the game of Scrabble only adds to the charm. [Well-reviewed Film], *Amazon Prime*.

Tier 5: Good Movies that Slightly Missed the Mark

40. **The Dig**†**:** Admittedly this film hits a lot of my personal preferences: it has Carey Mulligan, Ralph Fiennes, Lily James, and Johnny Flynn (I've save my Carey Mulligan appreciation for another of her films on the list). Johnny Flynn has had a great string of roles; *Beast* and *Emma.* in the last few years. The cinematography is great; beautiful landscapes and tracking shots. The film is not as serious and deep as it could have been, but it still a rewarding film led by a solid cast. [BAFTA – Outstanding British Film Nominee], *Netflix*.

39. **Saint Maud:** A solid psychological horror film who's strengths are the cinematography and the the score. A notable scene features only a center-frame stairwell (everything else is in the dark) and the camera slowly rotates. The film looks good (and dark and gloomy). The score is heavy at times, but a great example of feeling the bass. The plot itself is basic: a nurse who is (a recent convert to) Roman Catholic, is sent by god to save the soul of the hospice patient she is currently taking care of. The scares are not exactly there, and a few plot points could be more obscured, but the overall film is still worth the watch. It also points to Rose Glass as a writer-director to watch; this is her first feature. [BAFTA – Outstanding British Film Nominee].

38. **Herself:** A good film about the aftermath of domestic violence, and the long road to restarting one's life. The film excels in its relative simplicity: Sandra (played by Clare Dunne, who is rather good in the film; and has a tour de force courtroom scene that puts Vanessa Kirby's to shame) leaves/escapes her abusive husband and attempts to self-build a tiny home for her and her two daughters. There are a few plot holes, but they are tangential to the main plot. The film is rather moving and a worthy watch. [British Independent – Best Actress Nominee], *Amazon Prime.*

37. **Lingua Franca:** A solid debut from director, writer, and actress Isabel Sandoval. The film is an intimate look at the life of an undocumented, and trans, Filipina caretaker in New York City. The direction is rather good for a debut feature, Sandoval is someone to watch going forward; few items are overly blunt, issues arise organically, and both social issues are rarely shoved in your face. Instead, the film the excels in the simplicity of its social issues: taking a different route to avoid an ICE raid, the constant fear; the looks when a passport lists M as the gender, sexuality. Another example of the simplicity: she is taking care of an elderly Russian-Jewish lady; the connection is never explicitly made about how it was easier to flee prosecution and 'legally' emigrate to the United States, but is always there in the background. [Independent Spirit – John Cassavetes Award Nominee], *Netflix.*

36. **Da 5 Bloods:** Spike Lee's followup to *BlackKklansman* which means I can copy and paste part of the previous review: "Except, Spike Lee over does the point of the film" but now I can add, that Spike has too many subplots, too much sprawl onto topics that are not needed; opioid epidemic and colonialism; all of which make for an over two-and-a-half hour film. All that being said, the cast and on-location shots save the film. Delroy Lindo (*Malcom X*) is absolutely amazing as the most troubled of the four Vietnam vets. Clarke Peters and Isiah Whitlock Jr. (both in *The Wire*) are rather good. Chadwick Boseman has a smaller supporting role as well. The film is a great look at the African American experience in Vietnam, but Spike Lee went too over the top; removing the aforementioned subplots, would have made this film rank much higher. [SAG – Best Cast Nominee], *Netflix.*

35. **The Trial of the Chicago 7:** Written and directed by Aaron Sorkin, it is a noticeable improvement over his directorial debut, *Molly's Game.* The cast is rather good, with Sasha Baron Cohen delivering the performance of his career. Cohen does a lot of heavy lifting in carrying the film. The primary issue with the film is how heavy handed the messages are. Even though the messages about police brutality, government accountability and corruption, and the like, resonate today, the film makes sure you know that they resonate. One particular issue is the end title cards that informs one of the people was 'killed while jaywalking' instead of, you know, 'ran over by a car'. [Oscars – Best Picture Nominee], *Netflix.*

34. **Alone:** A great example of a minimalist horror/thriller film. The cinematography is great; shots of the road, the wilderness, and the use of windows and doors to split the frame are great. The film is great at building the initial tension, and is able to keep it up without needing to rely on deus ex machina and plot holes. The two main characters have enough development and background that the film isn't simply about a man tracking down a woman. [Well-reviewed Horror], *Hulu.*

33. **Possessor:** Written and directed by Brandon Cronenberg (son of David Cronenberg), the film has the gore and physical horror expected from a Cronenberg. What sets this film apart is the character development of the lead, with good performances by Gabrielle Graham (in an impressive prologue) and Christopher Abbott (*James White*), plus Sean Bean in a small role. The film has enough to say about tech companies, and is combined with good cinematography and lighting to create a good psychological thriller/horror. [Critic's Choice – Best Sci-fi/Horror Nominee], *Hulu.*

32. **Yes, God, Yes:** Written and directed by Karen Maine in her directorial debut, she also wrote *Obvious Child.* Between those two films, Maine is worth watching going forward. Natalia Dyer (*Stranger Things*) is rather good in the lead role. The film is the perfect blend on religious satire, sex, and early 00s nostalgia. It is a fun, and funny, watch. [Well-reviewed Comedy], *Netflix.*

31. **Miss Juneteenth:** A solid film, with solid performances, that makes the great choice of focusing on everyday life; there are no grand (forced) proclamations about the Black experience. Instead, only the struggles of day-to-day life are shown. It makes for a much more impactful film. The only drawback is the plot is not very original and runs a tad slow. Yet, these are all easily forgiven given the actors (especially Nicole Beharie and Alexis Chikaeze) and the character development. Channing Godfrey Peoples made her directorial debut with the film and is worth keeping an eye on. [Independent Spirit – Best First Feature Nominee].

30. **Mank:** The issue with making a film about the making of *Citizen Kane*, is that the viewer is constantly reminded they could be watching *Kane*: the optical printer combinations, the fireplaces, the dining table, the scenes which are quoted word-for-word, etc. The writing is rather good, but some lines are lifted from *Kane*, from the Marx Brothers, and quotes from Mank himself; what part of the script is original? Amanda Seyfried is rather good, so is Gary Oldman. [Oscar – Best Picture Nominee], *Netflix*.

29. **Weathering With You:** Directed by Makoto Shinkai (*Your Name*, *The Garden of Words*), the films is absolutely gorgeous. The animation is amazing, even if attentive views can see where scenes are similar in set up to Shinkai's earlier films. Speaking of Shinkai's earlier films, that is the main drawback of *Weathering*; it is inferior to *Your Name*, and there is almost no point at which you'd rather being watching *Your Name*. It is still worth watching and, when not copying *Your Name*, rather unique. [Annie Awards – Best Independent Feature Nominee], *HBOMax*.

Tier 4: Great Movies You Wish Did A Little Bit More

28. **Residue:** One of the more experimental films from the year and one of the better films about gentrification (it takes a more nuanced approach than most, though it is still imperfect). What drives the film are how rich the various Q Street characters are. Given the film is about a film-maker going back to his childhood home to research ideas for a new film, *Residue* blurs the line between reality, flashbacks, remembrances, and fantasy. Now for the obligatory gentrification rant: gentrification is everywhere and always a result of not building new housing in other areas. Also the people that often complain about gentrification are the same that step new housing because of developer profits. Build more housing. [Independent Spirit – John Cassavetes Award Nominee], *Netflix*.

27. **The Climb:** A delightful comedy-drama. The laughs are there, but the film is a great portrayal of (male) friendship. In this case, this isn't a smooth friendship. The film is broken into seven segments (each with title card), and each segment is composed of two or three seemingly continuous shots. The Christmas segment, with the camera wandering around the outside of the house is a delight. This is a well made film. Hopefully Michael Angelo Covino (solo director) and Kyle Marvin (co-wrote, co-produced, and co-stared together) continue making enjoyable films. [Nation Board of Review – Top Ten Independent Film].

26. **She Dies Tomorrow:** The film was made before Covid, but it takes on a new meaning post-Covid; some films get lucky. Written and directed by Amy Seimetz, the film is semi-experimental, and at times avant garde. It takes a while for the plot to come together for the viewer, but once it does it is great. Few films have this much to say about death, yet the viewer can't help but wish it had more to offer—the film is only 85 minutes longer. The cinematography is rather good, especially given the film is rumored to have had a shoestring budget. [Independent Spirit – Best Cinematography Nominee], *Hulu*.

25. **Palm Springs:** The film is a fun and new-enough take on the time loop film. There are enough funny moments, enough heart-warming moments, even if the overall plot is (at times) generic. Also,

you can't help feel that a film with an interesting premise could have pulled off a little more; one way would have been rounding out the minor characters. [WGA – Best Original Screenplay Nominee], *Hulu*.

24. **Judas and the Black Messiah**[†]**:** The film is everything *Billie Holiday* wanted to be and said everything *Chicago Seven* wanted to say. *Judas* outperformed both of those movies. Lakeith Stanfield and Daniel Kaluuya are both very good. Jesse Plemons puts in yet another good supporting role. The film treads the line of in-your-face and subtle beautifully. The cinematography is rather good; multiple medium-length tracking shots stand out. [Oscars – Best Picture Nominee].

23. **Another Round:** One of the best films about alcoholism and middle-age life. The film takes a simple premise: middle-aged teachers are bored with the routine and monotony of life and they decide to test a hypothesis that people function best with a BAC of 0.05%. They quickly notice their lives improve; they are better teachers, husbands, and parents. Yet, the drinking eventually becomes too much and starts to negatively affect their lives. Mads Mikkelsen (*Casino Royale*) is rather good as the lead. [Oscars – Best Director Nominee].

22. **Minari:** One of the best films about immigration in recent memory. Youn Yuh-jung is great as the grandmother and absolutely deserved her Oscar nomination for Best Supporting Actress. Steven Yeun (*Burning*) is good as well. The main reason the film can not rank any higher is the character of the mother is not developed. Although the fighting between the parents is a main source of drama, her character boils down to wanting to return to California, but simultaneously not being able to work in California. Yet, even with this flaw, the film is a good family drama, and a great immigrant drama. [Oscars – Best Picture Nominee].

21. **Promising Young Woman:** Carey Mulligan (*An Education*, *Drive*, *Shame*, *Inside Llewyn Davis*, *Mudbound*, *Wildlife*) is great, as always; I listed six previous Oscar-worthy roles, and yet she only has two nominations (one for this film) and zero wins. The film itself is far too in-your-face most of the time. It seems that many characters exist to be stand-ins for generic people. There is not much subtle about the film at all. The film is still good, but it easy to see how it could have been better. [Oscars – Best Picture Nominee].

20. **The Assistant:** Written and directed by Kitty Green (who previous directed documentaries) the film is a fictionalized look at a movie producer who is not named Harvey Weinstein but who is 100% modeled after Weinstein. The titular assistant is played by Julia Garner (*The Americans*) and she is rather good. Timing in at under 90 minutes, you can't help but want more; although the set-up is great; a single day in the life of the assistant, a lot of screen time is devoted to copying, collating, doing dishes, etc. Most of these scenes are done with no dialogue, adding to the detachedness of the character. Not much actually happens, which both helps keep the film grounded in the mental toll of working for a sexual abuser, it also takes away from the ability to elevate the film. The characters simply exist in the world, and we watch how it affects them and how they learned to cope (perhaps this is Green's documentary experience creeping in). The scene in Human Resources is both extremely realistic and face palm stupid; Weinstein is a cartoon villain, yet cartoon villains make for bad movies. Yet, that is the entire issue with how this film can't rank higher: the film never fully embraces its topic; the minimalism is great but also a constraint on how high the film can rank. [Independent Spirit – Best Actress Nominee], *Hulu*.

19. **I'm Thinking of Ending Things:** Charlie Kaufman (*Anomalisa*) is one of the best directors in the business, especially for more post-modern or avant-garde psychological films. The cast is rather great; Jessie Buckly (*Beast* and *Wild Rose*) has been mentioned in previous lists as an actress to watch. Though the film seems long, it clocks in at a little over two hours. The film is littered with wonderful Easter eggs, that when noticed, make the plot seem a lot more obvious. The first is the aspect ratio, 4:3, and all the interpretations of deliberately choosing that ratio in 2020. From there

most everything risks being a spoiler. If anything, the ease at which items can be put together (pay attention to bookshelves and the pop culture references) is a tad disappointing. Yet, this type of film, needs to be made more often. It was a well-stylized film, with interesting psychological analysis. [Well-reviewed Film], *Netflix*.

18. **Ordinary Love:** The performances of Lesley Manville (*Phantom Thread*) and Liam Neeson (*Love Actually*) elevate this film. The story is a simple one, and one that has been told countless times—wife (Manville) is diagnosed with cancer and undergoes treatment. Yet Manville and Neeson are so good together the viewer is drawn into their marriage, including the silly arguments over owning a hypothetical juicer. Neeson jabs Manville, and Manville banters right back; with Neeson often replying with a conceding, 'good job.' The script by Owen McCafferty (playwright, but first film) contains the the 'good jobs' and hypothetical juicer arguments; giving the leads a script they can run with. [Well-reviewed Film with Manville and Neeson], *Hulu*.

Tier 3: Must Watch

17. **Fourteen:** The film is an excellent and intimate look at a deteriorating (female, 20-something) friendship and mental illness, on a low budget (one can not help but imagine a larger budget version with Kaitlyn Dever and Elle Fanning; this does not mean Tallie Medel and Norma Kuhling were bad – both were rather good – simply that they were not great). The low budget is primarily noticed in the (at times) poor sound quality. The low budget also means lots of long takes, but the long takes help develop a sense of intimacy with the characters. The film deftly moves throughout time. It can be slow at times, but the viewer is rewarded with the rich independent drama. [Well-reviewed Indie].

16. **First Cow:** Co-written and directed by Kelly Reichardt (*Certain Women*), it follows in her usual style; simplistic, well-shot, good characters, working-class struggles, and slow. The slow pacing is what hurts the film, it could easily rank higher with better pacing. It is one of the best frontier films in recent memory; replacing the standard rugged and individualistic masculinity, with an intimate look at friendship and the American Dream. However, the shades of (a straight) *Brokeback Mountain* are hard to shake at times. Both John Magaro (*Carol*, *Overlord*, *Sylvie's Love*) and Orien Lee were rather good as well. [Independent Spirit – Best Film Nominee].

15. **Relic:** A great example of a simplistic horror film (a cast of three, with a few people in brief roles). The reason modern horror excels is that the real demons are our own (see *The Babadook*), and *Relic* fits into this mold. At risk of spoilers, I wont go into detail, only that the film nails what it wants to say, and even adds in some deeper points. One item I want to point out, is that in the beginning the daughter enters the house via the doggy door (as the door itself is locked). An amazing example of subtle foreshadowing and thematic film-making. [AACTA – Best Film Nominee].

14. **Swallow:** A psychological body-horror film about a housewife played by Haley Bennett. Bennett is rather good and deserved some more buzz than she received. The cinematography and set design is absolutely amazing. The modern mansion overlooking the Hudson is a character, and beautifully shot (the cinematographer was given a Spotlight nomination by the American Society of Cinematographers). Any other discussion would entail spoilers. [Well-reviewed Horror Film].

13. **Wolfwalkers:** The third film by Tomm Moore (*The Secret of Kells* and *Song of the Sea*). The 2-D animation is great, and charming. At the heart the film is a tale of friendship and family, yet it is expertly rounded out with religion, Irish–English relations, environmentalism, and authoritarianism. Moore's films have excellent characters, and deep themes. The voice cast did an amazing job. [Oscar – Best Animated Film Nominee], *Apple TV+*.

12. **The Half of It:** Written and directed by Alice Wu, the film is a modern telling of *Cyrano de Bergerac*. The premise is rather simple, a lonely boy asks/hires the smart (Asian immigrant) girl to write love letters to the the girl he (and her) 'love' (remember these are high schoolers). The cast primary consists of unknown younger actors, all of whom are good: Leah Lewis, Daniel Diemer, and Alexxis Lemire. Wolfgang Novogratz (*Yes, God, Yes*) also has a small and funny role. The film is an adult look at coming-of-age and self acceptance. [Independent Spirit – Best Screenplay Nominee], *Netflix*.

11. **Driveways:** Perhaps the most American experience film of the year. A(n Asian) mother and her son go to clean out he recently deceased sister's home and they meet the neighbors. What follows is a deep, character-driven look at America; from the nosy (and sorta racist) lower-class grandma and her grandchildren, the two Mexican kids who enjoy reading manga, and the (white) Korean War veteran next door. The film never is in your face, instead everything is shown through subtleties and natural character development. Both Hong Chau (*Downsizing*) and Brian Dennehy are good (though, you can't help but think if all-time greats were cast instead how much better the film would have been; the same goes for increased funding). Andrew Ahn (*Spa Night*) directed a simple, an yet amazing film. [National Board of Review – Top Ten Independent Film].

10. **The Father:** Based on the description, one might think the film is a standard elderly-family-member-loses-memory-and-family-deal-with-helping film (think *Still Alice*, *What They Had*, etc), yet this film goes far beyond that premise. That the film manages to take such an overdone premise and find such originality is what sets *The Father* apart, though any deeper discussion risks giving away important plot points—do not sleep on the film because you believe the premise to be tired. It also helps that Anthony Hopkins is amazing in the film, with Olivia Coleman also being rather good. [Oscars – Best Picture Nominee].

9. **Sound of Metal:** Riz Ahmed is absolutely great as Ruben, a drummer who loses his hearing; nominations and awards are justly deserved. The film has a simple premise, now-deaf drummer preemptively checks into a rehab facility for people with hearing loss. The film then avoids the tropes: there isn't a drug relapse, the facility is about accepting hearing loss. Ruben works with children as he also needs to learn sign language, he doesn't befriend then betray them. Instead he shares his love of music; music is noise put it is also waves, vibrations, that can be felt. The film is excellent in this regard. The sound in the film is great, going from loud, to muddled, to silent, to stressing background noise (e.g., bikes and bells of a street). Another great one is the initial lack of subtitles when characters are using sign language; Ruben does not understand the language—no subtitles. After Ruben learns sign, subtitles start appearing. This is a well made and well acted film (I didn't even mention Olivia Cooke and Paul Raci!). [Oscar – Best Picture Nominee], *Amazon Prime*.

8. **Ma Rainey's Black Bottom:** Viola Davis and Chadwick Boseman are great. This is Boseman's last film and he was truly amazing. Boseman carries multiple scenes. The film is based on August Wilson's play of the same name, and it does suffer every-so-slightly from being too much like a stage play (production values were great). Most characters are well developed, and the writing is crisp, but again, Boseman and Davis steal the show. [Oscar – Best Actor Nominee], *Netflix*.

7. **The 40-Year-old Version:** Written, Directed, Produced, and playing the read role by Radha Black in a highly autobiographical work. The film is hilarious and manages to avoid many potential cliches; on mid-life crisis, compromising artistic integrity, having artistic integrity, etc. And because the film avoid the cliches, it nails the above topics. The supporting characters are well-rounded. The only knock on the film is the picture is grainy, I will always insult films for purposely choosing poor picture quality. [Independent Spirit – Best First Feature Nominee], *Netflix*.

6. **One Night in Miami:** The four leading roles: Kingsley Ben-Adir, Eli Goree, Aldis Hodge (*Straight Outta Compton*, *Clemency*), and Leslie Odom Jr (*Hamilton*), are all great. The writing (written by Kemp Powers, who co-directed and co-wrote *Soul*) is rather crisp, even if it puts two of the films main faults on display: that the film is based off a stage play (which becomes noticeable early on) and the discussion of fighting for civil rights is a tad too heavy handed at times. Regina King directs and does a god job of fighting back against the limitations of a stage play. The costumes were good as well. [Oscars – Best Adapted Screenplay Nominee], *Amazon Prime*.

5. **Straight Up:** One of the best films about love and sexuality (or lack thereof) in recent memory. Written, directed, and co-starring James Sweeney alongside Katie Findlay – the two leads are both incredible at delivering the hilarious banter in the script. At times the film might seem over-the-top, but Findlay and Sweeney are so good faults can easily be forgive. Randall Park (*Always Be My Maybe*) and Betsy Brandt (*Breaking Bad*) are hilarious in their scene as Sweeney's parents; Randall Park in particular is a comedic god and still does not get the credit or roles he deserves. Beyond the ideas of love and sexuality, constant pop culture references (*Two Girls One Cup* is referenced in an expertly crafted call back) add to the humor, the cinematography is rather good as well. The film is such a new take on the rom-com, that when combined with a hilarious script and good acting, make this relatively unknown film earn its high ranking. [Independent Spirit – Best First Screenplay Nominee], *Netflix*.

Tier 2: Nearly the Best

4. **Soul:** Pixar really redeemed itself after *Onward*, *Soul* is one of their better films, perhaps not at the level of *Wall-E*, but close. The obligatory knock that the film is geared a tad too much toward children applied; had they dialed back some of the exposition and explanations the film would have been better. Yet, they still created a moving and impactful film about the meaning and purpose of life. [Oscar – Best Animated Film], *Disney+*.

3. **Babyteeth:** Eliza Scanlen – the youngest daughter in *Little Women (2019)* – is absolutely amazing in the film. She single-handedly elevates the film. Shannon Murphy does a good job directing in her feature debut. The cinematography is great; using a side-view mirror and the party scene are the best parts. Ben Mendelsohn is rather good, and who has put together a sneaky good run of films: *Mississippi Grind*, *Starred Up*, *Slow West*, *Darkest Hour*, *The King*, among others. The only major knock on the film is the plot is rather casual with time, events that seem like they should be close together, appear to be months apart—not weeks. [BAFTA – Best Director Nominee], *Hulu*.

Tier 1: Nearing Peak Abortion and Immigration in Film

2. **His House:** I should compile the times I've been saying horror is the best genre in film; *His House* is a perfect example. The film is one of the best immigrant experience of recent memory, and the best refugee film in recent memory (it is even more impressive given the number of films about immigrant experience this year; most likely due to the nativist turns in Europe and America). The tension between wanting to return 'home' contrasted with the ordeals and trauma of fleeing a war-torn country, to reaching England and wanting to start anew is perfectly captured. One scene worth calling attention to is a brief moment when Bol (Sope Dirisu) enters a European-feeling H&M, there is the security guard paying careful attention to this black man, but also, in the background is an empty children's ride, a rescue boat one, in motion – rocking back and forth – without anyone on it. It adds a nice layer of chills, but as the plot unfolds, is also very meaningful. [BAFTA – Outstanding British Film Nominee], *Netflix*.

1. **Never Rarely Sometimes Always:** Written and directed by Eliza Hittman (*It Felt Like Love* and *Beach Rats*) who has steadily been improving as a film maker, and who's plots are unique explorations of sexuality. This instantly ranks near the top of abortion films (and this year, in particular, there were a lot; most likely due to four years of Trump). The scene from which the title is taken, is one of the best scenes of the year; extremely moving. Though with such a monumental scene taking place midway through the film, the second half is tough to follow given the previous emotional high (low) point. There are times at which the film can seem a little heavy-handed but most of those point are easily forgiven. The only real draw back, which prevents the film from ranking higher, is that the cinematography is purposely grainy. I will always insult grainy picture; it does not make the film look gritty or real, it makes it look cheap and lazy. We have the technology, use it. *Never* is carried by the performance of Sidney Flanigan in their film debut, as well as Talia Ryder (also her debut, and Oliva Rodrigo's *deja vu* music video). [Independent Spirit Awards – Best Feature Nominee], *HBOMax.*