Films of 2021

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 2021 (some of these films might have IMDb years for earlier due to film festival releases, or a 2020 Australian release before a 2021 US release. Also Covid resulted in films getting a delayed 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 were 2020 award eligible, are counted as 2020 and therefore are not included in this list.

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 **3/26/22**; afterwards who knows. So watch them now.

Tier 13: Just Avoid

161. **Halloween Kills:** This movie is a complete miss. Any goodwill the franchise garnered with the reboot was instantly thrown in the trash. The film makes multiple failed attempts to expand on

Michael Meyer's lore. The film also tries to have multiple threads weaving in-and-out, none of which actually relate to each other. Yet, that isn't even one of the major flaws of the film. The major issues are that the film is 100% a (bad) Donald Trump commentary. Angry townsfolk drum up an angry mob to stop Meyers. The film goes out of its way to have a 'diverse' cast of characters; a black couple (where the wife is a doctor and the husband is a nurse!), an elderly interracial couple, and a gay couple. Yet these new characters are paper thin. They solely exist in the context of the plot as cannon-fodder on Meyer's killing spree. The film has no interest in scares, only racking up as many gory deaths as possible. [*Halloween* franchise], *HBOMax*.

160. **Zeros and Ones:** The problem with trying to deconstruct a genre (modern spy thriller) is that you often get disjoint pieces that never fit together. That is what occurred here. Abel Ferrara attempted to deconstruct the modern spy thriller and made an incoherent mess that is not thrilling. Ethan Hawke is okay, but the movie being pointless drags his performance down. [Ethan Hawke].

159. **Space Jam: A New Legacy:** The film is bad. It is corporate cash grab, intent on propping up Warner Brother's intellectual property. The script is awful, and I am shocked it was even approved. LeBron James (*Trainwreck*) was not very good in a leading role. [*Space Jam* franchise], *HBOMax*.

Tier 12: Awful Indies and a Few Awful Big Budget Films

158. **Prisoners of the Ghostland:** This gonzo genre mash-up simply does not work. The samurai, western, *Mad Max*, zombie(?!) genres do not fit in together. The film starts campy, but then attempts to be serious. Nic Cage has moments of maximum Cage, but not enough. The film could have leaned into its crazy, but instead spent too much time trying to be a deep art film. The result is an hour-and-forty-minute slog. [Gonzo Nic Cage].

157. **Blue Bayou:** In economics there is the concept of the sunk cost fallacy. That marginal costs matter, not previous costs; if you realize a movie is bad you should stop watching it right away. With this film you realize it is bad instantly. The opening lines are literally, "Where are you from? Noooooo, where are you *from*?" You instantly know it will be an in-your-face midwit liberal melodrama. Like many of the films in the bottom here, they are here because they are bad (and forced) reactions to Trump. The film proceeds to only get worse, checking off all the boxes: police brutality, domestic violence, etc. The film wants to be emotional, but it is written so poorly that by time the tears should fall you have been hoping the film had been over. [Independent Spirit – Best Cinematography Nominee].

156. **Kate:** Another in a string of *John Wick* knock-offs. At this point simply having modern fight choreography is not enough to rank highly (or even mediocre). What made *Wick* good was the character development. *Kate* has almost no character development and a plot that is predictable ten minutes in. Mary Elizabeth Winstead (*10 Cloverfield Lane*) was enjoyable but can not save the film. [Popcorn Movie], *Netflix*.

155. **Don't Look Up:** Being relatively down on *The Big Short* was one my best calls in a long-time. Adam McKay has been churning out garbage for upper-middle class white midwit liberals since then (and was a theme of *Short*). This film and *Vice* are un-funny and in-your-face statements of a very-dumb brand of liberalism. This film in particular attempted to hit on far too many current issues (and fails at most all of them). In a sentence I never thought I'd be typing, Jonah Hill had no point in this film (he plays a Donald Jr ripoff). The purpose of this film was to let certain viewers watch it and go, "Yupp, I am better than most people" while they then vote against nuclear power and housing density. [Oscars – Best Picture Nominee], *Netflix*.

154. **Eternals:** Slow. Poor character development. Poorly-written. But some beautiful landscapes are the bright point. Am I describing *Eternals* or *Nomadland*? Trick question, the answer is both. Being relatively down on Chloe Zhao really paid off here. Kumail Nanjiani *The Big Sick* was fun. [GLAAD – Outstanding Wide Release Nominee], *Disney+*.

153. **Godzilla vs Kong:** The movie is exactly what you'd expect based on the title. However that does not mean it is good. It is entertaining. It has a good cast, none of whom actually matter, as the plot is simply monsters fighting. [Popcorn Movie], *HBOMax*.

152. **Old:** It is time to take away the toys from M. Night Shyamalan again. *Glass* was bad. *Old* was a massive miss, and the issues are directly a result of his writing. He takes a cast with Vicky Krieps (*Phantom Thread*), Thomasin McKenzie (*Leave No Trace*), and Eliza Scanlen (*Babyteeth*) and does nothing with them. He butchered the source material. All of the criticism he's received in his career were on full display. [Vicky Krieps, Thomasin McKenzie, and Eliza Scanlen].

151. **Words Bubble Up Like Soda Pop:** The animation is rather weak (and cheap). The characters start with some extremely basic characterization and then are not really developed from there. The entire film is a disappointment. Though, I imagine some of the wonder is literally lost in translation—haiku does not translate well across language. [Netflix Anime], *Netflix*.

150. **Malignant:** The film is best viewed as a B-movie. It is not very scary – scares are often substituted for gore – and it very predictable. The second half of the film is simply bonkers, you can hate what you are watching, or you can go along for the crazy ride. [Critic's Choice – Best Horror Nominee], *HBOMax*.

149. **Shadow in the Cloud:** The first twenty minutes of the film sets up an interesting premise: a female character, played by Chloë Grace Mortez, boards a supply aircraft carrying a top secret package with a gremlin also on board. The first twenty minutes is fun, and gripping (mainly because Mortez is so talented), even if a little too on-the-nose. However, after that, the film quickly goes off the rails. The gremlin premise comes and goes, other plots develop, other crazy items happen. This could have been better, but it very much has a floor and this is most likely it. [Decently-reviewed Horror], *Hulu*.

148. **In the Earth:** The film starts a lot of threads and then never does anything with them; it also never decided what type of horror film it wanted to be. The film starts out with Covid commentary (there is a plague going around that ends up not factoring into the plot at all) and a potential beast in the forest. For a hot second, it is a *Blair Witch* knock-off, but even that thread stops quickly. Then it decided to be a ritualistic, cult-like horror film for a sequence. It attempts make a comment on qualitative vs quantitative work and understanding of life, but decides to do nothing with that either. It doesn't help that the hallucination scenes are not well done either, and the strobe lights do not look cool. [British Independent Film – best Editing Nominee], *Hulu*.

147. **Gaia:** Another eco-'horror', that is slightly less-bad than *In the Earth*. Practically everything, about *Earth* can be repeated here (except the qual v quant). Though, this is a good point to highlight that 'de-growthers' are idiots. That the way to improve the environment is to grow the economy so that we get more technological advances. Said advances will improve the climate. [Decently-reviewed Horror].

146. **Cryptozoo:** An animated film, whose animation style is out-there, and I could not get behind. Others might say it in unique and artistic, I though it mainly looked bad (and at times cheap). The plot is a tad too in-your-face with its themes. The voice acting is not good, though that could be a function of the bad dialogue. The film is an ambitious miss. [Independent Spirit – John Cassavetes Nominee], *Hulu*.

145. **Slow Machine:** Another overly-agressive independent film: grainy 16mm, a non-existence plot, experimental what-have-you, a needless cameo by a famous actress (obviously done as a favor to friends to help secure funding), lengthy monologues, among others. Luckily the film is 70 minutes so you don't have to put up with much. [Honestly, I don't know how this ended up on my list].

144. **Ma Belle, My Beauty:** It is easy to see why this film received *some* good reviews, few films have attempted to show polyamorous relationships. The film needs to be commended for being one of the first. Yet, sadly, the film did not know what it wanted to do outside of its major premise. The characters are rather weak, and the script does not do them any favors. In many ways, it proceeds like a monogamous drama/romance. It hits familiar tropes; the worst being rubbing in a new (and hot) fling in the face of the former partner. What is left is a slow drag, incapable of living up to the premise's potential. [Sundance – Audience Award Winner].

143. **The Souvenir Part II:** I disliked *Part I*, so it isn't a shock that I disliked *Part II*. A rude review would be that writer-director Joanna Hogg is obsessed with herself. The characters are not interesting or developed. The plot is slow. The only good thing is that this film is rather meta; the lead makes a film about her experience from *Part I*. I enjoy meta. There were probably all sorts of callbacks I missed. However, once again, this 'franchise' is about an unsympathetic and wealthy white woman who constantly makes poor decisions that the director wants us to feel sorry for (and worst of all, said character is quite literally the director). [National Board of Review – Top Ten Independent Film].

142. **Gunpowder Milkshake:** A not-good female-lead *John Wick* film. Except, we already had *Atomic Blonde.* This brings relatively nothing new to the genre and wastes a lot of its cast; Karen Gillan (*Oculus*), Carla Gugino (Gerald's Game) and Lena Headey (*Fighting With My Family*) to name a few. The constant neon lighting is fun though. [Needed a Popcorn Movie]

141. **Dementer:** A horror film that is not scary and is rather slow (despite being 80 minutes). There is a good idea here, a cult escapee starts working with special needs adults, but her past trauma haunts her. There is something to be done if she is terrorizing the people she is helping, or if the cult is, or both. Yet nothing really comes through. It a boring and not very good low-budget film. [Decently-reviewed Horror].

140. **I Blame Society:** Like many in this tier, the film tried something 'new' and missed. The premise is good, a documentary filmmaker desperate to make-it attempts to make a film based on the being told by her friends that she'd make a good serial killer. What follows is line-blurring film between real-life and fiction. Yet, it does not work. The jokes do not land, the acting is not very good, the social commentary is much too in-your-face (and also comes across as look-how-much-better-I-am-than-you); essentially it comes off as everyone's idea of a bad indie. [Independent Spirit – Someone to Watch Nominee].

139. **Respect:** An Aretha Franklin biopic where the only two redeeming qualities are Jennifer Hudson as Ms Franklin and Marc Maron (*Sword of Trust*). As the character development is thin and in-your-face. The plot far too familiar. Also the film is almost two-hours-and-thirty-minutes. It is yet another example of a biopic with, pardon the pun, no soul. [SAG – Best Female Actor Nominee].

138. **Barb & Star Go To Vista Del Mar:** The film does have some genuinely funny parts (include two songs by the resort piano player, "I Like Boobies" being the best of his two songs). Yet Kristen Wiig and Annie Mumolo's script and performances quickly become an overly-long SNL skit that stopped being funny a long time ago. Jamie Dornan puts in a great performance (and who has quietly been stringing together a good career: *A Private War* and *Synchronic*). Dornan's song, "Edgar's Prayer" is the highlight of the film. [Critic's Choice – Best Comedy Nominee], *Hulu.*

137. **Breaking Fast:** In a cynical take, I can only assume the good reviews are from people not wanting to deride the gay-Muslim movie. Yet, this is not very good. This movie has been made a million

times before, but this time the lead is a gay Muslim. That is the only change. And the film really makes sure the audience know he is Muslim. It is allegedly a rom-com, but you wouldn't know it because there are almost no laughs. The film really wanted to be about how one can be Muslim and gay, yet this film has been made already with other religions (e.g., *Saturday Church* and even *Disobedience*), and had already been with gay Muslims (*Naz & Maalik*, which I disliked, but that was solely due to pacing issues). [GLAAD – Outstanding Limited Release Nominee], *Hulu*.

Tier 11: Meh Big(er)-Budget and Horrors

136. **The Tomorrow War:** The movie is too long at almost two-hours-and-twenty minutes. The plot is self-contradicting (then again, almost all time travel movies are) and bloated with needless subplots and multiple endings. Chris Pratt is decent. Sam Richardson (*I Think You Should Leave*) is hilarious. [Dumb Popcorn Movie One Night]

135. **Finch:** You watch this movie because spending two hours with Tom Hanks is always a good idea. But outside of that, there isn't much here. The film is a standard post-apocalyptic film. It is very much PG-13, which makes a lot of the themes watered down (it very much tries to be a family-friendly film). It also doesn't help that the watered-down themes get muddled without a clear focus. [Critic's Choice – Best Actor in a SciFi Movie Nominee], *AppleTV+*.

134. **Slaxx:** A horror-comedy that is sadly not-very-funny and not-very-scary. The film is neither of those; instead it is preachy. Its anti-consumerism message is constantly in your face. Also, GMOs are good. The film would have worked better as a short, or perhaps finding a way to be more absurd and gonzo. [Decently-reviewed Horror].

133. **The Stylist:** The film could easily be ranked higher, but its hour-and-forty-five minutes runtime is simply too long. The film drags. Yet, there is a great character study about loneliness, wanting friendship but not knowing how friendship works. The film does slow-play it (and some of it works), but there are simply too many scenes that could be cut. [Decently-reviewed Horror].

132. **Penguin Bloom:** A predictable feel-good story about a mother learning to enjoy life again after a fall permanently put her in a wheelchair. At the same time her son (who blames himself for the fall), takes in a wounded bird (at least this is a true story, otherwise you'd ban your head against the wall). Naomi Watts as the mother is good, and the only rel bright spot (some of the sentimental moments land). [AACTA – Best Film Nominee], *Netflix*.

131. **In the Heights:** The film is a masterclass in not realizing the differences between Broadway musicals and film. The Broadway show is two hours and thirty five minutes, with an intermission. The film was only cut down to two hours and twenty minutes, without an intermission. The film has awkwardly placed emotional high points (that do not work in *film*, but work at the end of an act or before intermission). There are too many opening musical numbers that could have been cut. Lin-Manuel Miranda's character should have been cut into a cameo (this would have saved at least five minutes). The issue isn't that the underlying ideas are bad, but the presentation within a *film* was done horribly. [Golden Globes – Best Actor in Musical/Comedy Nominee], *HBOMax*.

130. **The Tender Bar:** Like many films in this tier, *The Tender Bar* mainly exists; you wont hate yourself while watching it, but there isn't much good either. Ben Affleck is really the only saving grace and the only reason to watch. The narration is dumb. The film can't sort out its class message to deliver it precisely. Christopher Lloyd is in the film, but rarely given enough time (or character development) to shine. [SAG – Best Male Supporting Actor Nominee], *Amazon Prime*.

129. **Army of the Dead:** The film has a unique spin on the zombie genre but it is sadly more interested in being a thrilling heist movie and head-palm family drama. It is also far too long. And yes it was written and directed by Zach Snyder. [Popcorn Movie], *Netflix*.

128. **Dream Horse:** This film is overly predictable, rather cliché, and brings nothing new. Yet, it is still a nice feel-good story. The character development is just enough so you don't constantly face palm, but the development is never used to add real drama or tension. What it does have, is the still under-appreciated Toni Collette. [Toni Collette], *Hulu*.

127. **Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings:** Perhaps I am jaded, but I don't see this as an example of diversifying the MCU, but rather a China cash grab by Disney. That the positive reviews reflecting diversity and depictions of China, are Disney trying to make money (the economist in me loves this). I found the action sequences inferior to some of the other films on the list (*Black Widow*, Bond, *Nobody*). The film also suffers from the ever-growing 'Marvelness' where the ending needs to be a massive CGI fight to save the world. The film has a good family story and an interesting villain, but the frequent action (and inferior) sequences make it difficult to rank higher. [Oscars – Best VFX Nominee], *Disney+*.

Tier 10: There At Least Something Good In These

126. **The Justice of Bunny King:** The two good things about the film are Essie Davis (*The Babadook*) and Thomasin McKenzie (*Leave No Trace*). Astute reviewers have likened it to Ken Loach's films (*I, Daniel Blake* and *Sorry We Missed You*) in that they depict the struggles of the poor (and an 'incompetent' government bureaucracy). Yet, here, most of the struggles are the result of Davis' character. When [the New Zealand equivalent of Child Protective Services] tells you, 'you can not do XYZ' and the character does X, Y, and Z, it is difficult to feel for the character. Also, it could have done more with McKenzie's character. [Thomasin McKenzie].

125. **Vicious Fun:** A horror-comedy that is neither vicious nor very fun. This film not bad, but it doesn't offer much in terms of scares or laughs. The idea of a support group for serial killers is essentially the only new idea, and it does rather little with it. Horror-comedy is a tough genre to balance, and this one does not pull it off. [Decently-reviewed Horror–Comedy].

124. **Vivo:** An animated musical with music by Lin-Manuel Miranda. The film offers almost nothing new (even the songs are cheap versions of Miranda's work on *Hamilton* and *Moana*). However, Miranda is talented enough that most of the mistakes and predictable plot are overlooked. Yet, his musical ability is the reason to watch the film. [NAACP Image – Best Animated Film Nominee], *Netflix*.

123. **Cry Macho:** The outline of the scrip is good (from a 1970s novel). Yet the dialogue is rather bad, with a lot of needless exposition (or repeating what was said in Spanish, in English; there is something to be said about how Eastwood-the-director viewed the audience's dislike of subtitles). The characters are not fully developed, and when they are the characters are very black-and-white. The scenery is beautiful and the film generally looks good. However, at the end of the day, the film is a much worse *Gran Torino*, that doesn't fully come together with its themes. [Clint Eastwood], *HBOMax*.

122. **Black Widow:** Marvel/Disney ruined the movie. There is a rather good move here. Yet the first thirty-to-forty-five minutes are multiple overly-long over-the-top action sequences. You regret watching before the movie gets going. And these action sequences do not have the spectacle of a Nolan film, or the intensity of a *John Wick* film. It is mainly CGI and editing. Florence Pugh (*Little Women*) is the best part of the film and she outshines ScarJo, easily. Pugh could secure the bag and lead an action franchise if she wants. In between the action sequences, there is a good film about family, but sadly it did not focus on that enough. [Critic's Choice – Best Actress in a Superhero Movie Winner], *Disney+*.

121. **Fried Barry:** An acid trip of a Midnight Movie. A heroin addict, gets abducted by aliens, and the aliens spend a few days in his body. The crazy is enjoyable, except the film isn't a coherent; it is a collection of five-to-fifteen minute episodes. Barry does this, then he does that. Next this other thing happens. There is no rhyme or reason for why the next things occur. Some of the episodes are nice, others are simply crazy. [Well-reviewed Horror].

120. **Ellie and Abbie (and Ellie's Dead Aunt):** An enjoyable LGBT film, that you wish had better execution; after coming out, Ellie's titular dead aunt becomes her fairy godmother (to help Ellie). The premise is a fresh take on the coming-of-age LGBT film. Yet, too many of the jokes do not land. The film gets a tad too serious at times (the issue being the overall film becomes uneven). I assume, having better teen actors would have improved the film (and help even out the laughs with the serious moments). [AACTA – Best Indie Film Winner].

119. **Plan B:** The abortion comedy is a fun genre (*Obvious Child* and *Unpregnant*). However, *Plan B* is essentially the same film as *Unpregnant*, right down to the subplot of the friend. And, *Unpregnant* has Haley Lu Richardson, this film did not. It still had a few good jokes, but this film was already made, and already made in a better fashion. [GLAAD – Outstanding Limited Release Nominee], *Hulu.*

118. **The Eyes of Tammy Faye:** Jessica Chastain carries the film, with some help from Andrew Garfield. The two are great. Chastain deserves all the nominations and awards she'll earn for this film. The hair and makeup is also rather good. Yet the film falls flat in the final third. The film could have been a good expose on the rise of the religious right (it goes into at times, but it fails to balance it out with the family drama). Speaking of family drama, one reason the film falls apart is that it forgets about the kids. Lastly, the film is a bit too sympathetic to the titular Tammy Faye, even if relative to Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson she is an Angel. [Oscars – Best Actress], *HBOMax.*

117. **House of Gucci:** Ridley Scott has two film on this list. One is amazing, the other is this film. *Gucci* is a complete miss. A great cast (Lady Gaga, Adam Driver, Al Pacino, and Jared Leto, among others) goes to waste. Though in the case of Jared Leto, he sabotages himself with an accent that is straight out of an 80s Mario Arcade game. Yet the film is over two-hours-and-forty minutes, in which very little occurs. A marriage falls apart in a minute (and not in the way *Citizen Kane* expertly did it). You just expected a better showing given all those involved. [SAG - Best Female Actor Nominee].

116. **The Many Saints of Newark:** This *Sopranos* sequel wasn't really needed. It was decent, but there are no major takeaways. Although often marketed as a Tony Soprano origin story, the plot revolves around Tony's father figure Dickie Moltisanti. The characters have some development. The production is rather good (especially sets and costumes). Yet, the entire time, you can't help but think you'd rather be watching the tv show. [*The Sopranos* franchise], *HBOMax.*

115. **Annette:** An experimental rock-opera that falls flat a few too many times. Perhaps if sequences were cut or shortened to get the run-time down from two hours and twenty minutes, the film would be better. As there are interesting ideas (albeit none are new) in the film about love, success, jealously, and exploitation. It is the experimental nature of the film that makes those themes start to hit home. Adam Driver and Marion Cotillard are both rather good. Simon Helberg (*The Big Bang Theory*) is surprisingly good in a smaller role. [Golden Globes – Best Actress in a Musical or Comedy Nominee], *Amazon Prime.*

114. **Parallel Mothers (Madres paralelas):** Penelope Cruz is good, but not quite deserving of the various nominations (most in part because the script doesn't give her character room to actually feel things. The script seems more interested in show the audience that something happened but developing the characters). The film does have an interesting premise that it wears on its sleeve (the audience can easily pick up where it is going early on). The set design is nice. One of the worst

items about the film is the lengthy (and needless) statement about the Spanish Civil War that gets shoehorned in the film, and takes up the final twenty-five minutes. It serves no purpose. [Oscars – Best Actress Nominee].

113. **Ron's Gone Wrong:** The primary issue is that *Ron* is seemingly a rip-off of another animated film on this list (*Mitchells*); a lot of the themes are the same, and *Ron* does all of these things worse. The villain here is literally a cartoon villain. The comment on technology is more in-your-face. The character development is much worse (though there is some, a lot relies on background information told to the audience). [Well-reviewed Animated Film], *Disney+*.

112. **Vacation Friends:** The film is rather funny, at times. John Cena is putting together a fun career. Robert Wisdom (*The Wire*) is good in a comedic role. The primary issue is that the film can't keep up its initial frantic pace, and the jokes start missing. The predictable plot isn't much of an issue, the film ranks this low because the jokes run out. But it ranks high enough because when the good jokes land, they are hilarious. [Well-reviewed Comedy], *Hulu*.

111. **Willy's Wonderland:** The strength of the film is Nic Cage destroying bloodthirsty animatronics and a shuttered Chuck E Cheese ripoff. Yet the plot gets repetitive, the supporting cast is nowhere near as talented as Cage (a few casting improvements probably make the film better). But it still 90 minutes of Nic Cage killing robots and playing pinball, which is still a fun way to spend 90 minutes. [Critic's Choice – Best Actor in a Horror Movie Nominee], *Hulu*.

110. **Venom: Let There Be Carnage:** Is this movie good? I'm not really sure. Is it homoerotic fan service? Yes. [Tom Hardy].

109. **Jungle Cruise:** Emily Blunt and Dwyane Johnson on a boat is always a good premise for a film. Let them have at it. Though you wish the film was more *African Queen* than *Pirates of the Caribbean*; these are two good actors (with great chemistry) but too much time is spent on forced lore, effects, and fight scenes. What else to you expect from Disney? [Critic's Choice – Best Actor in an Action Movie Nominee], *Disney+*.

Tier 9: Perfectly Quirky, Decent Indies, and Matt Damon

108. **Stillwater:** Perhaps in twenty years, people will look back on this film more fondly; it is an Amanda Knox film, in everything-but-the-names-of-the-characters. And given how close we still are to that ordeal, the viewer can't help but think about Knox and not the film in front of them. It also doesn't help that the film is two-hours-and-twenty-minutes long. Matt Damon is stoic, even if the writing for his character veers between trying-too-hard and not-enough at times. The film did end up being more than you'd expect, with well-developed characters, even if it hit a few-too-many cliches to have the film rank higher. [Decently-reviewed Crime Film].

107. **The Djinn:** A horror film I'd love to rank higher; well-made on a tight budget and simplistic-yet-developed. The film is about a mute kid who summons the titular Djinn in an attempt to gain a voice. However, to get his wish granted the boy must survive an hour with the Djinn. Even with only one real character, the boy is well developed, and there are solid scares. Yet, even at 82 minutes, the film struggles to fill the runtime; the same small two-bedroom apartment that helps provide intimate scares, is also the film's downfall. The film runs out of ideas with about twenty minutes left. [Well-reviewed Horror].

106. **Son:** I've seen *The Omen*. I've seen *Rosemary's Baby*. I've even seen *True Detective Season One*. I've also seen a plethora of mother–child possession films. And that is the issue with this film. It is not bad; Andi Matichak (*Halloween* reboot) is decent. Yet, there is nothing new to this film. It is a cobbling together of classic genre ideas, resulting in a film that you've seen multiple times before the beginning credits roll. [Well-reviewed Horror].

105. **Caveat:** The primary issue with this horror film is that too much of the plot is contrived; ten minutes in a character is on an island, in a decrepit house, and chained into a sleepwalking vest. It becomes hard to take the film seriously after all of that is forced. Yet, what follows does contain a few frights, and character development that semi-works (there are even more contrivances later on). [Well-reviewed Horror].

104. **Violet:** Oliva Munn is good, and helps keep the film together. However, the film is experimental (and not in the super-artsy way). We hear Munn's character's inner self-doubting voice. This works the first time or two, and again in certain situations. However, we hear the voice almost all the time (yes, that is how it feels for people with anxiety etc, but this is film we are allowed artistic license). Then there are what could be described as affirmations written in script on the screen (Munn's character fighting the self-doubt). The same criticism applies. The attempt is worthwhile, but executed poorly. [Well-reviewed Drama].

103. **Poupelle of Chimney Town:** The computer animation is often not-that-good. The plot is a tad-too-predictable. There a sequence hating on Central Banks which simply rubbed me the wrong way. The themes do not exactly come together either. Yet, the sentimental parts usually hit, so it can rank here. [Japanese Animation Prize Nominee].

102. **Army of Thieves:** The prequel to *Army of the Dead* and it is easily the better film. Matthias Schweighöfer directs and stars this funny heist film, it is in English-language directorial debut. The strength is the cast—who are mostly unknowns; Ruby O. Fee and Noémie Nakai being the best of the bunch. It semi-predictable fun with a cast you hope gets more opportunities. [Popcorn Movie], *Netflix*.

101. **The Suicide Squad:** I hope Warner Brothers keeps churning out these films. They are dumb fun. Margot Robbie is always excellent as Harley Quinn, and if we are being honest she is probably putting together the best 'superhero' performances. The new-found star of the film is Daniela Melchior in her English-language debut. She should get a chance to carry a drama as she appears to have the talent (when you can hold up with both Idris Elba and Margot Robbie. . .). Sit back and enjoy two-hours of fun and R-rated comedy and 'gore'. [Critic's Choice – Best Superhero Movie Nominee], *HBOMax*.

100. **The Beta Test:** Jim Cummings (*Thunder Road*) co-wrote, co-directed, and stars in this satirical (erotic) thriller. The film has a decent premise, but it is becoming increasing obvious that Jim Cummings is simply repeating the same ideas from *Thunder Road* (his debut). He plays a similar character each time (addiction and anger issues) and the themes are the same. There was a good idea here, and it probably should have leaned into the bonkers erotic side of the thriller, rather than the (forced) satire. [Jim Cummings].

99. **The Map of Tiny Perfect Things:** Yet another time-loop movie (it doesn't help that it is very much on the heels of *Palm Springs*). The film has an interest premise on the genre; two people stuck, both unknowingly. Yet sadly, the film leans into its Young Adult origins and familiar genre tropes. The ending is a tad rushed and leaves a few items unresolved, *that given a time loop* can easily be resolved. Kathryn Newton (*Freaky*, *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*, *Blockers*, *Big Little Lies*) does her best to elevate the film. She has put together a nice career so far. Hopefully she can get the chance to carry a film soon. [Critic's Choice – Best Movie Made for Television], *Amazon Prime*.

98. **Cruella:** Emma Stone elevates this film. Without her, *Cruella* could easily be down with *The Sopranos* prequel; well-made but not needed. Her monologue at Regents Park is great, and every time she portrays Cruella, she is simply perfect in the role. Perhaps no other actress could have pulled off this role. The costume design was amazing. Emma Thompson was rather good, though allegedly Nicole Kidman was the first choice (and that probably makes for a better film, see Kidman's

work in *Paddington*). Paul Walter Hauser (*Richard Jewell*) is hilarious as the henchman Horace, he has slowly been stringing together good performances. Now, the plot is semi-bad, and the overly long opening sequence is not very good. But all of that is mostly forgiven because of Emma Stone. [Oscars – Best Costume Design], *Disney+*.

97. **Everybody's Talking About Jamie:** In many ways, I want to rank this higher, but I simply can not. The rough tweet-length review would be, '*Love, Simon* but for non-binary kids, and slightly better.' As the issue is there is almost nothing new in the film, except that the main character is a teenage boy who wants to be drag queen. Yet, the cast is good and the film really does work as a feel-good movie. But there is (almost) nothing new. [BAFTA – Outstanding British Film Nominee], *Amazon Prime.*

Tier 8: Middle-of-the-Road Grab Bag

96. **Moffie:** A film that I probably ranked far too low. Perhaps because I was not prepared for most of the film to be in Afrikaans, with only some parts in English. The film is about a (gay) young man conscripted to serve in the extremely homophobic South African Army. Perhaps that is the other reason I did not care it; the racism, homophobia, and general cruelty of the army was over-the-top (even if real, it came across as being overdone; the drill sergeant doing a poor R. Lee Ermey impression). It also didn't help that a lot of the moments were very subtle, being mildly disengaged does not help. There are some good lengthy tracking sequences as well. However, this film simply did not do it for me. [BAFTA – Best British Debut Nominee], *Hulu.*

95. **Nowhere Special:** A fair bit of films in this tier are smaller indies with a moving premise that although it works, it does not excel. Here the premise is a blue-collar single-father is dying, and is 'interviewing' families to adopt his son after he dies. It is touching at times, and it does a decent job of avoiding being overly sentimental and mawkish. Yet beyond the basic premise, there really isn't much there (besides some economic-class issues). The performances are good, but nothing stands out. [British Independent Film – Best Actor Nominee].

94. **Rams:** A nice, if straight-forward film. It has a simple premise; feuding brothers need to put aside their differences to save sheep farming in their part of Western Australia. The acting is good. There are some nice shots of the Australian Bush. Yet, the film does little to elevate itself. While, not doing anything to make your dislike watching it. [AACTA – Best Film Nominee], *Hulu.*

93. **The Paper Tigers:** A decent kung fu that excels by avoiding stereotypes and whitewashing. Yet, most of the film is very familiar; former friends reuniting after several years, a caring-but-often-absent father, etc. A few conventional plot devices are avoided, but still too many remain. It is still a decent movie about friendship, with a few laughs, but not enough laughs or drama to elevate the film any higher. [Well-reviewed Comedy–Drama], *Netflix.*

92. **A Quiet Place Part II:** "Probably one of the films that I dislike relative to most people. In part because any movie that uses kids to build emotions, is a movie that I personally cannot get into." was my review of the first film, and it still applies. Kids do dumb things and I can't get behind it. Also, this film is much more of an action film, the horror aspect has been mainly dropped in favor of in-your-face action sequences involving the monsters (also the budget was greatly increased from the first film). [Critic's Choice – Best Horror Winner], *Paramount+.*

91. **Violation:** Firstly, the description of horror, does not really apply here (outside of a few body-horror moments); that could explain my ranking here. Yet the primary issue with the film is that very little happens. The film hides the lack of character development with shots of wilderness, a wolf eating its prey (it becomes painfully obvious why these shots are included), and a non-linear plot. The

non-linear plot helps keep the viewer on edge for a little bit, but the viewer is able to put it together rather quickly. There is a good idea here; the team of Madeleine Sims-Fewer and Dusty Mancinelli hopefully irons out the wrinkles in future projects. [Well-reviewed Horror].

90. **Paper Spiders:** Each year, there is almost always a film that I can not get behind, regardless of positive reviews (almost because characters act in a way that I find completely baffling). This is that film. It is almost certainly better than my ranking. But in a film about a high school student deciding if she should stay in Upstate NY or go to Southern California, well, yeah. [Well-reviewed Drama].

89. **Days of the Bagnold Summer:** A rather standard coming-of-age film; teenage son has his father cancel their summer plans and now is forced to spend the summer with his divorced-for-seven-years mother. The highlight is that the mother (Monica Dolan) is always supportive of her angsty son. That is nice to see, but it is not enough to hold the film together through the slow spots and familiar plot. There are some jokes, but not enough. Rob Brydon makes a brief appearance, but you can't help but think he could have done more (cause he is hilarious). [British Independent Film – Best Debut Screenwriter Nominee], *Amazon Prime.*

88. **Sweet Thing:** This film is aggressively independent. Shot in black-and-white 16mm (which looks rather good). Director and writer Alexandre Rockwell's two kids play the two leads. His wife plays a supporting role. It is not poverty porn, but can veer close to it at times. What is there, ends up be a sweet and touching film about growing up with neglectful parents. [Independent Spirit – John Cassavetes Nominee].

87. **Copshop:** A fun action-thriller set in a police station in the middle-of-nowhere Nevada. The film attempts to weave a complex story and the strands never quite come together (who is corrupt and why, how do these characters all know each other, etc). Tony Huss is great in a brief supporting role; he has established himself as a great character actor. But otherwise, there just isn't as much too the film. It is fun-enough and lacks any major flaws. Alexis Louder is decent in the main role and is someone to keep an eye on going forward. [Well-reviewed Action], *Peacock.*

86. **The Voyeurs:** This film could easily be up a tier, and easily down a tier; possibly the most polarizing film on this list. The film did need to end about fifteen minutes sooner. However what makes this film so polarizing is that is off-the-walls horny, and bonkers. Take *Rear Window* and crank the horny up to eleven. It is an erotic-thriller. The thrills are not really there, but the eroticism is on display; bordering on softcore. And somehow, it works. Sydney Sweeney (*The White Lotus*) bring enough erotic curiosity to the role so the audience is able to buy in. Ignore the paper-thin plot (let's watch our neighbors do it) and just have 'fun' watching. [Polarizing Erotic Thriller], *Amazon Prime.*

85. **No Sudden Move:** This Steven Soderbergh film is good enough. There are some iffy choices in the cinematography department; the film has a constant fish-eye effect where the edges of the screen are distorted. It might give you a headache. And it part of the reason the film ranks down here. The plot itself is a semi-standard MacGuffin-type noir; find a document and sell the document to the highest bidder. The film wants to say some (correct) things about race, home-building, and automobiles in America. Some of these land, some are too upfront, and the film also misses some key points it could have made. Although the film assembles an all-star cast (Don Cheadle, Benicio del Toro, David Harbour, and Jon Hamm, among others) the characters are rarely developed beyond each trying to make money and not die (and for a film that is two hours and almost feels slow, there was the ability to impart more character development). There is payoff at the end, but it isn't exactly worth the investment. [Steven Soderbergh], *HBOMax.*

Tier 7: Solid Horrors and Worthwhile Indies (that might have some flaws)

84. **The Boy Behind the Door:** I want to rank this minimalist-horror film higher, but it hits a lot of my pet peeves: i) that the cops do not instantly know where the 911 call is coming from, ii) when the cop does arrive he does not instantly search the house, and iii) the kid makes a bunch of mistakes (which will be kept under wraps to avoid spoilers). Yet, what is there is a decent horror/thriller film. It maps well to today, albeit if the mapping is a little forced. [Well-reviewed Horror].

83. **Stowaway:** The film is held together by the strength of the four-person cast, Toni Collette, Anna Kendrick, Daniel Dae Kim, and Shamier Anderson. All four are rather good, and a lesser cast would have resulted in a two-hour bore-fest. Though the film is slow at times, the cast holds it together by bringing the needed character development to keep the viewer interested in the ethical dilemmas being presented. The sets and special effects are decent, but pale in comparison to other recent high-budget space movies. The one major flaw of the film (like a lot of the something's-gone-wrong-in-space subgenre), is that the film becomes a collection of cascading negative results, each making the situation more dire; which after the fourth new issue in a row becomes a tad grating. [Toni Collette], *Netflix.*

82. **Werewolves Within:** A horror-comedy that isn't exactly scary, but comes with a few laughs. The strength of the film is the cast made up of I-know-that-person-what-were-they-in-again-I-swear-I've-seen-them-before actors. Sam Richardson (*I Think You Should Leave*), Milana Vayntrub (*AT&T Commercials*) Catherine Curtin (*Orange is the New Black*), Michaela Watkins (*Sword of Trust*), among others. Enjoy the cast, and a few laughs. [Critic's Choice – Best Actor in a Horror Nominee].

81. **Boys from County Hell:** There is a decent horror-comedy floating around here. Except, even at 90-minutes, it takes far too long to get going. The opening act isn't funny enough to function as a comedy, nor is it scary. The film took far too long to get going. Once it does, there is a fun and novel vampire film here, albeit with a few too many genre tropes (there are at least two face-palm moments). [Well-reviewed Horror-Comedy].

80. **Bloodthirsty:** The primary issue is that the film does not bring much new to the horror genre. It feels like a combination of films and themes you've seen before; the all-consuming desire to be great/famous/successful mixed with hallucinations being real. Yet, the film gets the viewer engaged enough that a 90-minute runtime is palatable. [Well-reviewed Horror].

79. **Our Friend:** A new-enough take on the loved-one-dying-from-cancer genre. The film differentiates itself with the constantly supportive friend (played by Jason Segel) helping out. Casey Affleck plays a similar version to his character in *Manchester By The Sea.* Dakota Johnson is good as well. It is those three that allow the film to rank here. Otherwise, it would rank lower; the script simply isn't that good. And even though it brings new ideas into a familiar genre, a lot of the action is standard and done before. [Solid Cast and Decent Reviews], *Amazon Prime.*

78. **Boiling Point:** A film that should probably rank higher. Except the film touches on a lot of the same ideas (literally, and very specifically) as a film ranked much (much) higher. So while watching *Boiling Point*, I was constantly thinking about the other film I had seen (and how much I wanted to watch that instead). The primary strength is the one-shot look of the cinematography (e.g., *Birdman*) the camera moves effortlessly through, in, and out of the restaurant and kitchen. There is more character development than you'd expect, and a fair bit of social commentary as well. The main downfall (unrelated to other food-based films from 2021) is that we've seen the general idea before: recently-divorced and alcoholic chef loses grip on his business. The films needs those other elements to overcome its trope-y premise. [BAFTA – Outstanding British Film Nominee].

77. **Small Engine Repair:** The film is rather tightly written, but the linear plot hurts. It takes a while for the film to get going (perhaps at least forty minutes even). And even then, it becomes easy to

guess where the the film is going to end up. The performances are good, but you wish the film had more to it. [Well-reviewed Thriller], *Hulu.*

76. **Coming Home in the Dark:** After a brief set-up, the film kicks into gear with good cinematography and multiple tense scenes. Yet, the film can not keep up the tension. Also the film quickly recycles (good) shots in the dark of a car on the road. The film attempts to make some points of moral relativism but most of these are known about halfway through the film. Daniel Gillies walks a thin line of solid acting and overacting. [Well-reviewed Horror], *Netflix.*

75. **Martyrs Lane:** A decent 'horror' film that has a few tense moments. The strength of the film is its two child actor leads: Kiera Thompson and Sienna Sayer. How director Ruth Platt got such amazing performances out of them is impressive (compare to *The Djinn*, another horror this year that relied on a child actor). The primary issue is that the view pieces things together before the films fully reveals everything (though it does a solid job of delaying the reveal) [Well-reviewed Horror].

74. **High Ground:** This film is rather similar to another on this list, *The Furnace.* Both are about Australia's treatment of aboriginal people set against a backdrop of violence. Yet, *High Ground* plays its hand a little too out-in-the-open. Plot developments seem more motivated by making the desired statement than character development. It is not bad, there are beautiful shots of the outback. Some of the editing seems off, character quickly move around in gunfights—faster than they should (give the editing). [AACTA – Best Film Nominee], *Hulu.*

73. **Cicada:** For a low-budget indie, there are a few amazing shots, almost all involving the use of reflections in water. The film can seem a little slow at times, and it doesn't do much to distinguish itself from other LGBT films. The childhood trauma portion is pressed too hard. Cobie Smulders (*How I Met Your Mother*) plays a therapist who does not seem qualified. Yet despite these flaws, it features solid and deep characters. [Independent Spirit – Best First Screenplay Nominee].

72. **The Obituary of Tunde Johnson:** The film has an excellent premise, a black gay teen is murdered by the police and he then enters a *Groundhog Day* situation, reliving that day over-and-over again. Yet, the writing and acting betrays the premise. Cop killings and coming-out should be enough, but the film attempts to hit on too many current social issues (prescription drug addiction, a Tucker Carlson character, etc). Each of these side points distract from character development. The film also struggles with the fact that the themes are better than the actors; the actors are not bad, but they can not keep up with the film at times. There was an excellent film to be made here, but the execution was not it. [GLAAD – Outstanding Limited Release Nominee], *Hulu.*

71. **The Nowhere Inn:** It takes the viewer a little bit to realize that the film is mainly camp (it attempts to play up its status a 'thriller' for a bit). Once, you realize that it becomes more enjoyable, partially because the 'plot' does not exactly come together. In fact, as the film progresses it become more meta; what exactly is a documentary vs real-life and what of you are watching is meant to be itself a meta commentary on the character's lives. The film stars St. Vincent and Carrie Brownstein as versions of themselves (with CB making a documentary about St. Vincent as the main plot of the film). But sadly it doesn't exactly come together. [Independent Spirit – best Editing Nominee], *Hulu.*

70. **Jakob's Wife:** A fun horror-comedy, and modern take on the vampire film. Barbara Crampton (*We Are Still Here*) carries the film, she is a delight as a meek middle-aged housewife-turned-vampire. The scares are not really there, but there are enough comedic moments all disguising the family-drama at the heart of the film. Although technically a vampire film, the film is really about a woman finally standing up for herself, while navigating a relationship with a husband she does still sorta love (or perhaps simply feels obligated to stay with). [Critic's Choice – Best Actress in a Horror Nominee].

Tier 6: Into the Easily Recommended Films

69. **Wildfire:** A semi-tight 85-minute drama about shared trauma and loss (a few scenes get slow). This film would make an excellent back-end to a double feature with *Belfast*. Nika McGuigan and Nora-Jane Noone were both good, sadly McGuigan died shortly after the film was made due to colon cancer. Admittedly, it is one I could probably have ranked higher if I got more into the film. It was writer-director's Cathy Brady feature debut, and she is probably someone to keep an eye on. The linking of the previous violence in Ireland to Brexit is a little forced, and at times heavy-handed, but that is the only real downside. [British Independent Film – Best Debut Screenwriter].

68. **The Vigil:** The film is a far inferior *His House* (more of a statement regarding the quality of *His House*); both are haunted house films, where the haunting is based on trauma. So this film has great potential, and is also focused on antisemitism (and leaving the orthodox religions). Yet the film does not put these ideas all together in the end. The end gets rushed, and lost sight of what the film wanted to be about. A better final twenty minutes (of a 90-minute film) would have moved the film up a tier or two. [Critic's Choice – Best Actor in a Horror Nominee], *Hulu.*

67. **Raya and the Last Dragon:** It is a run-of-the-mill Disney film. It has the standards; really good animation (the water and hair are really well done) and a great voice cast (Akwafina is killing everything). Yet, the film really leans into the Disney formula and has a hard time bringing anything new to the Disney canon. [Oscars – Best Animated Film Nominee], *Disney+.*

66. **County Lines:** What the film lacks in originality, it makes up for in gritty realism and two solid performances. The outline of the plot is simple: a poor kid from a single mother, takes up being a drug mule to provide money for the family. The portrayal of trap houses, injection, etc are all gritty. The film does skip over some background scenes (that could have been used for building characters) sometimes this works, other times it does not. It also helps that the film is only 90 minutes. Conrad Khan and Ashley Madekwe are rather good. [BAFTA – Best Supporting Actress Nominee].

65. **No Time To Die:** The odd-numbered Craig–Bond films are a delight. This last entry, is the worst of those three (still head-and-shoulders above the even-numbered films). This is probably the third or fourth best Bond film (with *OHMSS* entering the fold). Like *OHMSS*, this film (and two good Craig films), humanize Bond like no others. The plot contains some great elements, particularly for being Craig's last film), yet too much of the plot is needless exposition with an out-of-nowhere super villain (with dubious motivation). Those plot flaws drag the film down. Some brief re-writes could have greatly improved the film. The action sequences are well-done and the visuals are great. It is a fitting end to the Craig years. It sets the bar high enough, it will be difficult to topple Craig as the greatest Bond. [Oscars – Best VFX Nominee].

64. **Censor:** One can't help but think this film would have had more impact if made fifteen years ago. The film centers around a film censor in charge of removing disturbing content from movies in the 1980s (because violence in movies causes violence in real life!). Sadly that trope is overdone and thoroughly dis-proven. It does it get the (often correct) idea that the censors themselves are the worst among us (the lead is concerned they might have murdered their sister when they were kids). Sadly, none of the ideas come together as well as they could (nor is the film scary; although it is a decent psychological horror. [British Independent Film – Best Debut Screenwriter Nominee], *Hulu.*

63. **Limbo:** Written and directed by Ben Sharrock, the film grows on you. It is slow, and the humor is rather dry. Once you pick up on some of the subtleties it improves. The visual style is reminiscent of Wes Anderson, without the whimsy; shots are frequently staged in a similar matter. Yet, there are better films about being a refugee and awaiting residency. If Sharrock dies in the comedic elements, he could be a director to watch. [BAFTA – Outstanding British Film Nominee], *HBOMax.*

62. **Wild Indian:** It take a bit to get through the opening sequence (set in the 1980s as oppose to the present day), mainly because the child actors are not very good (I'd go so far as to say that one of them was grating). However, once the movie jumps the present things get going, with solid character development (even if a few plot points become contrived). Michael Greyeyes (*Women Walks Ahead* and *Blood Quantum*) is good. There are good points about Native American life and guilt. Yet, not all of the finer points come together. [Independent Spirit – Best First Feature Nominee].

61. **Cyrano:** An adaptation of the play Cyrano de Bergerac, that has a good spin on the classic. The best upgrade is having Cyrano be played by Peter Dinkledge; rather than being about some dude with a large nose it brings an major (perceived) hurdle to the potential relationship. Dinkledge is rather good, he was deserving of some nominations. Another update was that the film is a musical, most of the songs are run-of-the-mill, but there a few times when Dinkledge is able to shine. The chorus song of *Wherever I Fall* being the best. The two major issues are: i) the film is uneven; an amazing sequence is followed by a major lull, and ii) the play has been adapted so many times. *The Half of It* came out last year and was far superior and a great modernization (this years version is a period piece). [BAFTA – Outstanding British Film Nominee].

60. **The Dry:** A well-shot crime drama. The film at times veers into procedural territory, yet there are enough twists-and-turns to keep the film moving along (though it is not a noir). The film's newness comes from the main character coming back to his hometown after a crime (old hat), but he was once a suspect in a murder case as a teenager (the newness). Eric Bana is rather good (as is most of the cast), they help keep the film moving along when it could have easily bogged down. [AACTA – Best Cinematography].

59. **Encanto:** Another run-of-the-mill Disney film. It has the standards; really good animation (the hair and sand are really well done) and good songs (However, Lin-Manuel Miranda wrote better songs for *Vivo*). Yet, the film really leans into the Disney formula and has a hard time bringing anything new to the Disney canon. Although the argument could be made the the film was Disney's first about a Hispanic family, the film did not seem to lean into the culture compared to Pixar's *Coco*. [Oscar – Best Animated Film], *Disney+*.

58. **Being the Ricardos:** The film has all the hallmarks of a would-be Oscar contender (Amazon surely bet big on it); an amazing and deep cast, solid production values, and Aaron Sorkin as the writer (Sorkin was also the director, and that is essentially the problem). Like Sorkin's earlier directorial efforts – *Molly's Game* and *The Trial of the Chicago 7* – the film does not go together well. The 'interviews' with former people involved in the making of *I Love Lucy* does not work. Javier Bardem and Nicole Kidman carry the film through the lulls. Trying to restrain the film could have improved it (there are a few side-plots that could go away; woman's issues in the writing room does not work well with the rest of the film, as an example). Fans of the show probably will get more out of the film than most. [Oscars – Best Actor and Actress Nominees], *Amazon Prime*.

57. **Josee, the Tiger, and the Fish:** A well-written anime. Some of the animation is mediocre—the digital animation at times feels out of place and looks bad (relative to the traditional animation used for most of the film). The plot could be considered cliché and filled with tropes, but it works. It really is a tear-jerker of a film about love and ambition with a few laughs thrown in as well. [Japanese Animation Prize Nominee].

56. **Nobody:** The film is fun. Bob Odenkirk (*Mr. Show*) is rather good as the action start, an apparent soy boy 'turned' into John Wick (the film's writer has written all three films in the *Wick* franchise). Christopher Lloyd (*Taxi*) makes an appearance in a supporting role. The film veers into camp at times, and it works. There is enough character development and camp humor to keep the film going. [Critic's Choice – Best Action Nominee], *HBOMax*.

55. **Candyman:** Let's get the major flaw out of the way: Gentrification is everywhere-and-always a result of not building housing (in other areas). The incorrect view on the causes of gentrification are a major drawback. That being said, the film does a good job of resurrecting the franchise (it is a sequel to the 1992 film, and it is worth watching before hand). The 1992 film, of the same name, was focused on the neglect of public housing in the early-90s, but like anything from the early-90s, suffered from a sort-of white savior complex. The film re-orients the titular villain as a key part of black culture. I wouldn't be surprised if more films are made, each would have potential; this film doesn't have all the themes come together. The only other knock, is that the film simply is not that scary or that thought-provoking. The themes are frequently worn-on-the-sleeve and too on-the-nose. [Critic's Choice – Best Horror Nominee].

54. **The Harder They Fall:** The film assembles an absolute all-star ensemble cast, and does almost nothing with them. Characters are flimsy at times and often retreads of previous western characters. The cast does help make up for these shortcomings. However, the real flaw is the directing. The film is directed by first-time director Jeymes Samuel, and most of he decisions actively make the film worse: i) the bass is over-mixed and much too loud, ii) the film is a neo-Spaghetti Western and a much worse *Djano Unchained* (and *Django*) and iii) the film is overly stylized, perhaps the worst example being the all-white town having all the buildings painted. . . white. [BAFTA – Outstanding British Debut], *Netflix*.

53. **PG: Psycho Goreman:** This is a fun Midnight/B-movie, and boy is it a blast. It is made a shoestring budget; reported less than a million dollars. The film is led by two child actors who are rather good (though they occasionally over-act). The film is bonkers and successfully leans into its absurd premise; the strongest creature in the universe, hellbent on destroying everything, has been unsealed but is under the control of a little girl in possession of a magic gem. Absurd hilarity ensues. The practical make-up effects are crazy and it absolutely works. Most of the jokes are good and land, "Not my hunky boys". The film is a gif paradise. I often say that films need lean into their absurd premise to improve and this one did and it worked. [Well-reviewed Horror].

52. **Concrete Cowboy:** The film has a standard premise; troubled youth is sent to spend the summer with his (previously-) absent father. There is the standard tension between father and son, as well as the father being a 'good' example vs the fun-but-drug-dealing friend. Despite these standard tropes, Idris Elba, as the father, elevates the film. The focus on black cowboys in Philadelphia offers a unique take on the genre (and complete with the mentions of the erasure of black people from the historic record). Though, one place the film veers off-track (and this is a running theme of this tier) is blaming development for the problems faced by the cowboys. [Idris Elba], *Netflix*.

51. **Free Guy:** Ryan Reynolds keeps making enjoyable films and he has perfected this standard character. This film has plenty of laughs, with enough depth and social commentary. Jodie Comer (*The Last Duel*) was great in the film, and was able to go toe-to-toe with Ryan Reynolds. This was a great year for her. Taika Waititi is his usual hilarious self. Utkarsh Ambudkar (*Britney Runs a Marathon*, *The Broken Hearts Gallery*) is good. Joe Keery (*Stranger Things*) brings his great flow and skill. Lil Rel Howery (*Get Out*) is funny as always. This is a fun movie. [Critic's Choice – Best Sci-fi Nominee], *Disney+*.

50. **Luca:** Pixar's entry this year, and it caps off a rather mediocre year for Disney/Pixar. None of the films broke much in new ground, but rather were showcases in what throwing money at animation can buy you; scales, water, waves, transforming from sea creatures to humans. This film works best as (an unintended) LGBT coming-of-age story. Though as a story of summer friendships it still works. It certainly isn't one of Pixar's best efforts, but nothing to put down either. [Oscar – Best Animated Film Nominee], *Disney+*.

49. **Bad Trip:** Eric André (*Don't Trust the B— in Apartment 23*) leads this off-the-walls hidden-camera take on the buddy-road-trip film. The film gives André a juice bar (and a real bar, and a zoo, and an Army recruitment tent) and lets him cook. Andre is hilarious and makes this film literally laugh-out-loud funny. To improve the film, Tiffany Haddish (*Girls Trip*) is even it, along with Lil Rel Howery (*Get Out*). There is enough plot so that the film isn't pure stupidity. But, it still is the funniest film of the year that involves gorilla jizz. [Well-reviewed Comedy], *Netflix*.

48. **Fear Street Part One (1994), Part Two (1976), and Part Three (1666):** This is three separate movies, that form one continuous narrative. Following the precedent set with *Nymphomaniac*, I have lumped all three films into one (if ranking individually they get better as the trilogy progresses). All three are directed and co-written by Leigh Janiak (*Honeymoon*) who has established herself as a good horror director. All three films work as a (soft-) R-rated *Stranger Things* (a Duffer brother even got a special thanks in the credits). Multiple young actors put in solid performances (including Sadie Sink), most of whom had never been in much of note before this set of films. There is enough character development and social commentary to elevate the film, even if the scares are not lacking (at times it is more of a slasher homage – particularly *Part Two* – than a horror film). A lot of really good cinematography, especially low-light cinematography. [Well-reviewed Horror], *Netflix*.

Tier 5: Good Under-the-Radar Indies and Solid Wide-Release Films

47. **Test Pattern:** A good film about the aftermath of sexual assault, albeit with a few problems. An initial problem is that you wonder how this success woman chose to date an semi-shy tattoo artist, yet as the film develops you see how caring he is, and how much work he does around the house to support her career. The big problem, is that too much of the film is look-how-bad-and-conservative-Texas-is. That theme is too in-your-face and heavy-handed throughout the movie. Toning that down would have been a major improvement. At 85 minutes you wish it developed more minor characters. It ends up being a debut for writer-director Shatara Michelle Ford, that makes them one to watch. [Independent Spirit – Best First Feature Nominee].

46. **This is Not a War Story:** A lovely (anti-war) film, that quickly ranks among the best made about Afghanistan/Iraq (selecting this as the best would be a very hipster move, but one that could be difficult to argue with; *The Hurt Locker* and *Zero Dark Thirty* are ranked highly in-part because of production values (It would be ranked above *The Outpost* and *American Sniper*). The film is a nice drama about the life of veterans once they've returned home. The film features multiple veterans in smaller supporting roles (one wishes their roles were expanded). The only drawback is that the film could have aimed larger with a better plot; the plot was essentially returning to 'normal' life is difficult. There was not a major driving force behind the plot and it relied on dialogue to advance the plot. Yet, it is still moving at times and one of the better anti-war films made in recent years. [Independent Spirit – John Cassavetes Nominee], *HBOMax*.

45. **The Power:** This is a solid horror film. There are a few scares and tense moments. Though, sadly it was unable to keep the tension up the entire time. There is even a dip two-third's through that breaks the film in two distinct segments; that night and the next day. The events of the next day are still good, but a bit of the let down compared to the literal bumps-in-the-night. The is a good bit of character development, even if some of it could have been more subtle. [British Independent Film – Breakthrough Producer Nominee].

44. **Swan Song (Benjamin Cleary):** There are two films titled *Swan Song* this year. How it happened, I do not know. This is the directed by Benjamin Cleary. Mahershala Ali really holds the film together. The production design is great; the modern sets – from furniture to bathroom fixtures – are great, the cinematography is rather good. Yet the script is a let down. The idea of the film makes for a solid start to an ethical-dilemma sci-fi film, but script can't hold up. The script doesn't contain

moments that make you face palm, rather its simply over explains or creates situations so that the ethical dilemma becomes an easy choice. [BAFTA – Best Actor Nominee], *AppleTV+.*

43. **King Richard:** The film is a little to long (almost two-and-a-half hours). It also could have dived deeper into its tennis background; the film rarely discusses the ins-and-outs of tennis. It merely presents that young stars often burn out (as the sport is competitive and players need to start young). Yet, it never succeeds in being a(n even mildly) scathing review of youth tennis; though there are multiple snide comments about overbearing parents (which is a bit of irony). Will Smith was good, though you wish the script had given his character more depth and complexity. His character – and the general inspirational messaging – results in the film often veering into borderline-hokum. [Oscars – Best Actor Nominee], *HBOMax.*

42. **The Furnace:** The directorial debut of Roderick MacKay, this is an Austrian Historical Western. The film does try to incorporate a lot of themes, and it does pull most of them off. Yet, it does feel like it tried to do too much, and could have better developed characters and the plot. What is there is good, and shows the diverse range of humans attempting to strike it rich in 1890s Australia (and the aboriginal people who exist outside the social norms). There are multiple great landscape shots, and nighttime shots. [AACTA – Best Film Nominee].

41. **The Courier:** The film is a standard Cold War espionage thriller. The film follows basic conventions of the genre, but does so rather well. Benedict Cumberbatch is rather good in the lead (and playing a standard mildly/seemingly-weak character for him by now). Jessie Buckley is in the film, but relegated to a supporting role. The isn't much that could have been done to elevate the film, other than, 'make this scene have more impact.' Yet the production quality is rather good, so the film ends up here. [British Independent Film – Best Supporting Actor Nominee] , *Amazon Prime.*

40. **The Night House:** One of the spookier horror films of the year. Like another film on this list, it gets this more universal haunting (but not as well). The scares are the best part, with Rebecca Hall's (actor: *Christine* and *The Gift*, director: *Passing*) acting being the other. Hall is amazing, her facial reactions are great and she keeps the character grounded enough so you don't think they are going completely crazy. But the film can not rank any higher as it fails to wrap everything up in a satisfactory manner. The premise ends up being a tad contrived and therefore the payout falls flat (especially with how much it had been setting up). [Critic's Choice – Best Horror Movie Nominee].

39. **The Green Knight:** The film is beautifully shot, with many excellent landscapes. The production design is rather good as well. Yet the themes fall flat to me, or in regards to environmentalism; beyond heavy-handed. The ideas of honor, legends, etc do not land and it doesn't ruin the movie, but rather makes it slow and boring. I was constantly left going, 'so okay'. This ranking is very much a function of the quality of the filmmaking. [National Board of Review – Top Ten Independent Film].

38. **The Novice:** As much as I'd like to rank this film higher it gets soooo many things wrong about Teaching Assistants: i) the TA takes a students exam when there is still time left, ii) the TA dates the student, and iii) the TA is presumably a senior (the film mentions they are applying to grad school), yet is the head TA for a large-lecture course. Moving on from my hyper-specific issues, the film is one of the better looks at obsession. Rowing is the perfect sport, as it is both individual, while teams-of-four row the boat together. The characters are decently developed with some nice shots and editing. [Independent Spirit – Best Feature Nominee].

37. **Last Night in SoHo:** Let's get the bad out of the way; the script is not good. The roommate/school rival character is beyond cliché and unnecessary. The film almost completely unravels in the last thirty-or-so minutes (I'll avoid spoilers). This needed a much better script. The Anya Taylor-Joy character could have been given more screen time (and development; again, see the script). The

same can be said about the development of Thomasin McKenzie's character's development. Both are still rather good with what they've been given (and are a large reason the film ranks here). The other reason for the ranking is the production value; costumes are rather good (especially the white rain coat), the sets are good, and the cinematography is rather good (multiple shots with 'mirrors'). However, the film boils down to a what-could-have-been; a better script and this film ranks much higher. [BAFTA – Outstanding British Film Nominee].

36. **West Side Story:** Those that enjoy musicals (especially the source material) can rank this film higher. Though, what I particular dislike here is that it is a stage musical; the intermission throws of the flow of the film (stage musicals are structured in a different manner than film). The songs are good, but you already knew that (and this shouldn't really get credit for them; it should get credit for putting the songs into settings). I also dislike the Shakespearean ending (yes, it is a *Romeo and Juliet* updating). Oh, nor can I fully get behind we-aren't-fighting-we-are-having-a-dance-battle-which-is-actually-a-fight (up until an actual fight is needed for dramatic effect). The cinematography is rather good, one of the better shot films of the year (it also had a 100 million dollar budget); all the scenes in the gym are amazing. The film is obviously a commentary on current America. Ariana DeBose and Rachel Zegler are the standouts from the cast. [Oscar – Best Picture Nominee], *HBMOMax* and *Disney+*.

Tier 4: (Borderline) Oscar-Worthy (in at least one category) Films

35. **Holler:** Another entry in the coming-of-age in the declining-Rust Belt genre (think *Columbus*). This version doesn't do much to separate itself, and hits a lot of the standard points (e.g., closing factories, opiate addiction, China, and Trump). At times it becomes a little too on-the-nose. What elevates the films is the performances: Jessica Barden (even if she is playing a character ten years younger than her real age) is great as the intelligent-but-trouble female lead, Becky Ann Baker (*Freaks and Geeks* and *The Half of It*) as the beating-heart of the community is great. If either of these two roles were played by inferior actors, the film would have been much worse. [National Board of Review – Top Ten Independent Film].

34. **Zola:** A rather funny film about a bonkers real-life weekend trip to Tampa. Colman Domingo (*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *If Beale Street Could Talk*) is amazing in a supporting role. The co-leads of Taylour Paige and Riley Keough are good, but not enough to really elevate the film. Yet the reason could be due to the script. The script was not interested in character development, but only the insanity of the story. However, the script does do some wonderful items (the film is based on a twitter thread) to pay homage to its source material. [Independent Spirit – Best Feature Nominee].

33. **The Killing of Two Lovers:** Calling this a discount *Marriage Story* is both a compliment and a way of writing off what this film accomplishes. It is a simple film about a family going through a separation. Like *Marriage Story*, the plot is excellent—it goes back-and-forth on who's in the wrong and why the marriage is falling/fell apart. While *Lovers* is a lower-budget film, it makes great use of its budget. Set against the beautiful Utah mountains, all the scenes are long takes (often with child actors!). So many lovely shots of the husband driving around in his truck. Clayne Crawford is rather good in the leading role (despite him doing a mediocre performance of a song). Writer-director Robert Machoian can be worth watching. [Independent Spirit – John Cassavetes Nominee], *Hulu*.

32. **tick, tick. . . Boom!:** Lin-Manuel Miranda's directorial debut, but Andrew Garfield steals the show. Andrew Garfield's performance is rather good, both the acting, dancing, and singing; the piano in the empty arena will most likely be shown in award clips. LMM doesn't bring much to the table as a director so far, the second-best cinematic sequence was a now-former roommate moving into a new apartment and the song cuts between the old and new. The best being the swimming pool– inspiration sequence. Robin de Jesús (*The Boys in the Band*) is starting to put together a solid string

of supporting performances. Hopefully he does more film work (he has primarily done Broadway). [Oscars – Best Actor Nominee], *Netflix*.

31. **The Mitchell's vs the Machines:** The extremely high score on Rotten Tomatoes is very much a function of this being an animated movie aimed at kids. There are many (almost major) flaws: cliches and plot holes abound. Yet, the charm (in part because of the mixed methods animations) easily overcomes the flas. You know the emotional parts are coming a cross-country road trip away. And somehow, they still land as the jokes and stylistic choices keep you engaged throughout the nearly two-hour film. [Oscars – Best Animated Film Nominee], *Netflix*.

30. **The Summit of the Gods:** The animation is rather good, especially the mountains; snow capped terrain has never looked so well drawn. The film also has a good plot and character development (even if the plot relies on a MacGuffin; a camera from Mallory's attempted ascent of Everest). The film develops excellent characters that show how deep passion and purpose run; even if seems crazy to others. [Annie Awards – Best Animated Independent Feature Nominee], *Netflix*.

29. **Shiva Baby:** A perfect encapsulation of the dinner-party-from-hell (in this case a Shiva; a Jewish post-funeral luncheon). The film does have a fair bit of Jewish culture, but most of the themes are about being at a party and being forced to interact with people you have no interest in being around (this fear is highlighted by a score that could easily accompany a horror film). The film is a great portrayal of bisexuality (and female sexuality). The film could have used more development of the supporting characters (the film is only 80 minutes). However, it is a promising start to writer–director Emma Seligman's career. [Independent Spirit – John Cassavetes Winner], *HBOMax*.

28. **The Card Counter:** Oscar Isaac holds the film together. With a lesser lead this film would not rank nearly as high. The performance wasn't a slam-dunk Oscar nominee, but a borderline one. Paul Schrader direction and camera choices are good; multiple long shots (that let Isaac shine), and the distorted angles in the prison scenes are great. The scene at the light park is visually impressive (one of the better visual scenes of year; and a way a film can be visually impressive without effects or landscapes). Yet the film sorta exists at the end of the day, it has a message and it gets most of it across. But you can't help wish it was better, and yet, there is not a glaring flaw that could have improved it. [National Board of Review – Top Ten Independent Film].

27. **Nightmare Alley:** The film checks a lot of Oscar-bait boxes: great cinematography, wonderful sets, nice costumes, an amazing cast that deliver solid (but not great) performances. Yet, the film in many ways, exists. The plot follows the well-tread rise-and-fall of man trope. The characters are developed but not fully developed. The two-and-a-half-hour runtime is a tad long, but the film isn't exactly slow. Yet, when it is finished, you simply wished a better film was made given all the talent involved. [Oscars – Best Picture Nominee], *HBOMax* and *Hulu*.

26. **Red Rocket:** Written and Directed by Sean Baker (*Starlet*, *Tangerine*, *The Florida Project*). This is the weakest of those four, but his films make frequent appearances in my top-fifteen. Simon Rex is absolutely amazing as down-on-his-luck porn-star Mikey Saber. His energy is amazing, and nearly carries the movie all by himself. Rex did not get enough recognition for his performance. I'd even go as far to say he might have been better all five Best Actor nominees (and certainly better than three of them). Suzanna Son is a breakthrough supporting actress. Though one issue with this film is that Baker is not able to get his usual excellent performances out of found non-actors; too often their delivery of lines is flat. What remains is one of the better films about toxic masculinity. [Independent Spirit – Best Actor Winner].

25. **Swan Song (Todd Stephens):** The second of the two films with the same title. This one is a delightful look at Rust Belt decay and American Multiculutralism by tracking an elderly gay former-hairdresser escape his nursing home to do the hair for a former, and Republican, client's funeral. The

plot veers into absurdity at times, but you are able to roll with it (escaping a nursing home would result in the cops quickly tracking him down; again run with it). Udo Kier is absolutely amazing, and carries the film, he deserved more recognition for his role (I'll go as far to say he was the better lead actor in a film titled *Swan Song*). Kier brings so much to the character; a man broken by the AIDS epidemic, American politics, and the economic decay of Sandusky, Ohio. [Independent Spirit – Best Actor Nominee], *Hulu.*

24. **Spider-Man: No Way Home:** I will go out on a limb and say that this film deserved a Best Adapted Screenplay nomination, few, if any superhero movies have pulled off what *No Way Home* did. This film makes the accomplishment of *Endgame* look like amateur hour. It helps that *No Way Home* struck gold with its primary cast of Tom Holland and Zendaya. One knock is that the VFZ are not that good (especially an early fight scene on a highway bridge). This is easy a top-five (live-action) superhero film. [Critic's Choice – Best Superhero Film Winner].

23. **The Tragedy of MacBeth:** Most people can easily rank this higher than me. Shakespeare's prose often does not do it for me. When you are not a fan of the the dialogue's style it hard to give an extremely high ranking. Now, the film has enough bright spots to have it rank rather high: sets, cinematography, and acting. The film was shot on sound stages with these amazing-yet-minimalist sets. It has a Golden Age of Hollywood feel. The black-and-white cinematography is so crisp and detailed. Multiple amazing shots. Denzel Washington is great as MacBeth, Frances McDormand puts in a solid performance as Lady MacBeth. It is a good film, and those that like Shakespeare can easily rank this even higher. [Oscars – Best Cinematography Nominee], *AppleTV+.*

22. **The Humans:** A wonderful adaptation of a play by the same name. The cinematography makes excellent use of the rundown apartment. The cinematography is under-appreciated (only nominated at the Independent Spirit Awards), most likely because all of the action takes place in said apartment. The script is rather good; the dinner-party-from-hell. A subgenre I personally enjoy. Though, unfortunately the viewer is able to piece together where it is going (there are a few too complaints about money that could have been subtler), the relation to 9/11 seemed a little forced, or at least a different disaster could have been used as a character development device. Most of the cast is great; Richard Jenkins (*Kajillionaire*) is the best, June Squibb (*Nebraska*) is always good but isn't given much, same with Steven Yeun (*Burning*). Beanie Feldstein is not good enough to pull of her role (I believe she tries to force some sort of accent again). Amy Schumer is rather good in her limited role. The film is rather good, but it could have been better, which is the shame. [Independent Spirit – Best Cinematography Nominee].

21. **Little Fish:** Before I get into the film, it must be pointed out that it was filmed in March 2019. That must be said as the film is about a pandemic; a 'virus' causes people to lose their memories (essentially Alzheimers and/or Dementia) which can slowly occur or occur instantaneously. Some of the reviews might be a result of how well it maps to today (perhaps in a few years, I'd regret this rating). However, the film is at its a core a love story of two people falling in love and trying to stay in love as society loses their collective minds. The film does an excellent job of making the audience question what memories are real and which are characters attempting to try to remember. Olivia Cooke (*Me and Earl and the Dying Girl*, *Thoroughbreds*, *Sound of Metal*) is great as well as Jack O'Connell (*Starred Up*, *'71*). [Well-reviewed Sci-fi], *Hulu.*

20. **CODA:** The film is an amalgamation of every single bad applying-for-college coming-of-age film ever made. And yet, it works for two reasons: i) the deaf family (Child Of Deaf Adults), and ii) Emilia Jones. Watching the (extremely horny) parents sign their disgust/inability to refrain from sex for two whole weeks is hilarious. When the funny and feel-good moments hit, they hit; in part because the film used deaf actors. The real star of the film is Emilia Jones who made this film her coming out party. With this performance she has instantly established herself as an actress to watch. I am eager to see her next work. [Oscars – Best Picture Nominee], *AppleTV+.*

19. **Dune:** Denis Villeneuve is probably the *second*-best sci-fi director in the business behind Alex Garland (and yes, this puts Villeneuve above your favorite). The film is a technical masterpiece. The cinematography is amazing (there are multiple low-light sequences where you are amazed at the picture quality). The sandscapes are reminiscent of *Lawrence of Arabia*. The sound is great. It helps the film that the cast is absolutely stacked, worse actors would be unable to carry the plot. The plot (and relative lack of character development) are the only drawback. However, that is part of adapting a sci-fi political thriller into a novel. One other knock, is that film is very much Part I. At the end you want to watch Part II, not because you are invested in the plot, but because the plot is very much unresolved. [Oscars – Best Picture Nominee], *HBOMax*.

Tier 3: Must Watch Territory

18. **The Killing of Kenneth Chamberlain:** This might be the best film about police brutality. (*Fruitvale Station*, *Detroit*, *Monsters and Men*, *The Obituary of Tunde Johnson* and *The Hate U Give* all come to mind—*Blindspotting* is the only one I'd consider rankin higher, but that isn't explicitly a police brutality film). Frankie Faison (*The Wire*) is absolutely amazing, and should have received more recognition for his performance. The film takes place almost entirely in real-time (starting with the initial call for 'help' and the titular killing). The film makes great use of showing the range of officers: i) those that want to help, ii) those with some bias, iii) and those that should never be allowed near a badge. The title of the film was a smart choice. By removing all doubt as to the outcome, the viewer focuses in on how the vents will lead in death (. . . murder . . .). David Midell is a director to watch. [Independent Spirit – Best Actor Nominee], *HBOMax*.

17. **Mass:** Easily the most emotional film of the year, and the hardest watch. The film is about the aftermath of a mass school shooting. The film is essentially two sets of parents in a room talking about said shooting. The characters are complex and well-written. The film lacks much in the way of cinematic touches (an argument for ranking it slightly lower can be made because of this; in many ways it feels like a play; even more so than *The Humans*. Yet the film was never a play, it was written for the screen by writer-director Fran Kranz). The only other issue, is that you wished the cast was better. The performances are really good—especially Martha Plimpton (*Raising Hope*) and Ann Dowd. Yet you can't help but think what an A-lister could have done; given the film takes place in one room with four people talking good performances are central to the film. [Independent Spirit – Robert Altman Winner].

16. **Belfast:** Out of all the black-and-white films this year, *Belfast* might have the best cinematography. The shots are beautifully composed. The cast is rather great; Judi Dench, Jamie Dornan, and Caitríona Balfe are all rather good. The film is able to touch on a lot of items, and almost always shows instead of telling the audience what is going on. The script itself is very tight, almost everything in the film is there for a reason (and comes back later). I particularly like the references to *High Noon*, and makes one of the more dramatic moments even more moving (the reference to *One Million Years BC* is also rather good. The inclusion of *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* even comes off as great; dual-purposed and not pandering). It is a great encapsulation (and tribute) to life in Belfast in the late 60s. [Oscars – Best Picture Nominee].

15. **Spencer:** Kristen Stewart is great, as always. The costumes are rather good, though on Diana gets color; most everyone else is dressed in bland earth tones. The film is not what you'd expect for a historic drama, and takes a few liberties, but the liberties almost always work. If anything, the downside is the film is a little too heavy-handed at times. An example would be the frequent references for pheasants (the film starts with trucks rolling over a dead pheasant, with a lot of references continuing; now, they do work and the film culminates nicely with this motif). The visuals are rather good. One nice touch, but is evidence of the film overdoing it, is that Diana's dresses

are tagged, 'P.o.W.' standing for Princess of Wales, with the (heavy) implication they are labeled Prisoner of War. [Oscars – Best Actress Nominee], *Hulu.*

14. **The Lost Daughter:** I want to rank this film higher, but I am simply unable to. The writing is great, with many subtle items; a re-watch would help immensely in this regard. One example is the wearing of an Arizona shirt. Olivia Coleman, Jessie Buckley, and Dakota Johnson are all great. Coleman and Buckley deserve any nominations and awards they take home this year. The character are all well-written and complex; the film is an excellent look at motherhood, career success, freedom and the trade-offs between them. Yet, first-time director Maggie Gyllenhaal does little to impart *cinematic* qualities. The film is well-written and well-acted; lacking in inspiring cinematography or editing. Without those elements it is simply too difficult to rank higher. However, the film is wonderful. It takes a while too develop, but I would not call it slow. [Oscars – Best Adapted Screenplay], *Netflix.*

13. **Together Together:** Ed Helms is rather good, he plays an older and more toned-down version of his character on *The Office.* It is hard to see anyone else in his role. Patti Harrison (*I Think You Should Leave*) is also good. The two work together rather well. The script is well-written and extremely tight; multiple callback jokes, great jokes in general, and all compacted into 90 minutes. The film is simply a delightful look at friendship and loneliness (another film on the list looks at these two themes and does a much better job). Of particular interest to me was the film had a bit of insulting Woody Allen films, the credits then are in Windsor Light font—the font used in all of Allen's films post-1977. [Independent Spirit – Best Screenplay Nominee], *Hulu.*

12. **Licorice Pizza:** Usually, there is a film where I outsource my review to someone who a) is a much better writer and b) writes essentially me review. Somehow, this is the film for that: `https://www.theringer.com/movies/2022/3/17/22982718/licorice-pizza-paul-thomas-anderson-oscars-best-original-screenplay`. Yet for a film ranked this highly, it seems unwise to jot down my own thoughts (even if the link is to basically my thoughts). The cinematography is excellent as always, PTA is a master (*Phantom Thread*, *There Will Be Blood*, *The Master*). The opening walk-and-talk is amazing and completely turns the meet-cute on its heels. What makes the film work is that both leads need each other, and become better people because of each other (despite everyone around them being even worse flim-flam men, self-absorbed actors, crazy, or Prop 13-defenders—defending Prop 13 being the worst among them). The film does get a tad too episodic for my tastes; it bounces between the above mentioned other men. But what remains is rather good and another example of why PTA is one of the best filmmakers in the business. [Oscars – Best Picture Nominee].

11. **The French Dispatch:** Another difficult film to properly rank. The film is the most-Wes Anderson of all Wes Anderson's films. Does that imply it is then his masterpiece? Or am I clouded by being *relatively* down on *Grand Budapest Hotel*? The film is composed of an opening and five vignettes; allowing for Wes Anderson to literally assemble everyone—if I tried listing the cast list, this entry could take up a page. Instead, I'll highlight Léa Seydoux (*Inglorious Basterds*), Jeffrey Wright (*Bond* Franchise), and Lyna Khoudri. I feel that in twenty years, we'll all wonder why this film was not acclaimed as it should be (the reason being the vignette structure is hard to accept). [WGA – Best Original Screenplay Nominee], *HBOMax.*

10. **Passing:** A wonderful character study of two African-American women (and one of their husbands) in the 1920s. The cinematography, in black-and-white and 4:3 ratio, is great. The lighting is amazing and is used to highlight the character's 'current' race. When passing as white the actress are brightly lit, appearing to be more 'white' (and vice versa). There are multiple great foreshadowing moments I wish I could discuss in great detail, but will not to avoid spoilers. Besides the performances of Tessa Thompson (*Annihilation*) and Ruth Negga (*Loving*), which were both great, the

film expanded beyond racial themes. These character are complex social, intellectual, economic, and (bi(?), a(?))sexual beings. The depth of their characters results in the film being ranked here. [Oscars – Best Supporting Actress Nominee], *Netflix.*

9. **Old Henry:** There is a major flaw that means this film can not rank higher (as it could easily be in the next tier); the character of the son is poorly written and poorly acted. In a major confrontation with the father and being told he can't do something the son tells the father, "when I'm old enough, I'm leaving and you'll die alone" (or something to that extent). Rather than show the boiling-over hatred of his father the script makes it abundantly clear (though the actor does not have the talent to have made that work either). But getting beyond that only flaw, the film is a good revisionist western in the vein of *Liberty Valance.* Being mentioned in the same breath as *Liberty Valance* is evidence for how good this film is. Tim Blake Nelson is fantastic as the titular Henry, a lesser performance would easily mean this film ranks lower. The cinematography is rather good and provides the film with a realistic-yet-gritty feel. [National Board of Review – Top Ten Independent Film].

8. **Come True:** An interesting sleep-based horror film. The dream sequences would make Dalí jealous. The film excels as it realizes that there is a universal terror about nightmares. The film sets up a lot in the first hour that it can't fully bring home. However, what remains is still spooky and through-provoking. It is a much better (and scarier) *Inception.* [Well-reviewed Horror].

7. **The Last Duel:** It is difficult to get into the details as it risks running into spoilers. The film is *Roshomon*-like; three people recounting their version of events. Using this method helps the film in a number of way: i) the ability to change the audience's view of the various characters, ii) avoiding the film becoming a drag. The film tells a short version of each person story, with each version filling in gaps, or showing scenes from a different point of view. The film is two-and-a-half hours, yet does not feel long. Also, the obligatory statements on production value hold—excellent cinematography, editing, sets, etc. Sadly, it is easy to see why the film flopped, *at the box office*, people went in expecting *Gladiator*-in-the-Middle-Ages, but instead got a #MeToo-character-drama-in-the-Middle-Ages. [National Board of Review – Top Ten Film], *HBOMax.*

6. **Nine Days:** Edson Oda writes and directs his debut-feature, and makes a statement doing so. The film is possibly the best film about the importance of life, the simply joys, and the heartaches. Oda is able to make a powerful film by taking a metaphysical approach that is grounded in the rules of that reality. The film also gets great (yet subtle) performances out of its primary cast: Winston Duke (*Us*), Zazie Beetz (*The Harder They Fall*), Benedict Wong (The *MCU*), and Tony Hale (*Arrested Development*). The film could have easily been cheesy yet it is simply inspiring. [Independent Film – Best First Feature Nominee].

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Tier 2: There an Argument to Make these Tier 1

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5. **The Worst Person in the World (Verdens verste menneske):** One of the best (dark) (sex) romantic-comedies (if it can be called a rom-com; it really is genre bending). The script is wonderful, innovative, and hilarious. It is the type of movie Woody Allen wished he was capable of still making (deeply moving with amazing sex jokes)—writer-director Joachim Trier (*Louder Than Bombs*) ranked *Annie Hall* as the third-best film. That Penelope Cruz received Best Actress nominations over Renate Reinsve is absurd; Reinsve carries the film through the ups-and-downs. [Oscars – Best Original Screenplay Nominee].

4. **The Power of the Dog:** Sadly, most reasons for its excellence quickly becomes a spoiler; the early portions might seem slow but it is worth it. Benedict Cumberbatch, Jesse Plemons, Kirsten Dunst, and Kodi Smit-McPhee are all good. The landscapes are beautifully shot. The camera movement is often good. The film excels due to director Jane Campion's show-don't-tell view on character

development. The characters slowly unfold in complex ways; almost all of which is via their actions, never their words. At its best the reasons for actions are not even shown, but implied. Much is then left to the viewer to interpret. [Oscars – Best Picture Nominee], *Netflix*.

3. **Language Lessons:** The film the child of both Natalie Morales (co-lead, co-writer, and director) and Mark Duplass (co-lead and co-writer). The film is an obvious COVID film; the scenes are all Zoom calls and video messages. Yet, in fifteen years, it will not be clear that the film was made during COVID; there is no reference and the Zoom calls are perfectly rational in the context of taking language lessons. The two leads are amazing, without them the film would start to fall apart. In addition to their acting, the underlying film is simply a beautiful and heart-warming look at friendship. This is no where near an all-time classic, yet it practically perfects what it aimed to achieve. [Well-reviewed Comedy].

2. **Drive My Car:** Easily one of the best films of the year. The three-hour runtime does not feel like three hours (though it is long). The film contains many of the best scenes of the year, however discussing them borders on spoilers or can't accurately be described, "the scene with the two actors in the backseat of the car". The character development is top notch—the film is essentially how character react and move on. The plot is mildly meaningless. One knock would be that the film is highly reliant on Chekov's *Uncle Vanya* as a plot device (one of the best scenes involves the acting out of the play), therefore the play is doing the work, not the film. [Oscars - Best Picture Nominee], *HBOMax*.

Tier 1: Oink!

1. **Pig:** It is very fitting that Nic Cage was in one of the worst films on the list (*Prisoners of the Ghostland*) and is also near the top. Cage is amazing as a reclusive truffle farmer. The general outline of the film is rather standard and has been done to death; Cage's truffle pig is stolen and he goes on a mission to retrieve his titular pig. As yet, without spoiling the film, it retrieving his pig is absolutely not the purpose of the film. The film ends up as a ninety-minute showcase of love, loss, friendship, family, and ambition. The film excels in its simplicity, and even if those themes have been done to death, *Pig* manages to bring a fresh perspective to them. The outdoor shots are rather good, as well as the framing. Writer–Director Michael Sarnoski in their directorial debut is instantly someone to watch. [Independent Spirirt – Best First Screenplay Winner], *Hulu*.