Films of 2022

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 2022 (some of these films might have IMDb years for earlier due to film festival releases, or a 2021 Australian release before a 2022 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 2022 releases – but a 2021 film festival showing – that were 2021 award eligible, are counted as 2021 and therefore are not included in this list. With the rise of (direct-to-) streaming, multiple awards have a TV or Streaming Movie Category. When applicable these films are included as well.

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) Black Reel Awards (replacing NAACP Image), 7) AACTA Awards (Australian Oscars) 8) Sundance, 9) Guild Awards: SAG, DGA, PGA, ACE, and ASC, 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 is up-to-date as of **5/5/23**; afterwards who knows. So watch them now. I only included without-ads services. I did not include 'free' streaming with a cable add-on (Starz, Showtime, etc). Many of these can be rented on streaming services, but the ability to rent was not included.

Tier 15: Avoid

172. **Pinocchio (Disney Live Action):** The film has all the hallmarks of the bad live action adaptations: far too faithful to the original, bad acting, nothing new added. Unlike some of the bad live actions,

this doesn't even have a charismatic lead to make it even tolerable. If anything Tom Hanks makes the movie worse. Joseph Gordon-Levitt is awful as Jiminy Cricket. Some of the effects are bad, but a few are good. The film is a complete miss. If anything, it probably belongs in its own tier of awfulness. [PGA – Best Streaming Film Nominee?!?!?!], *Disney+*.

171. **Tall Girl 2:** I ignored the *Tornado Warnings*. The plot is *Nonsense*. A minute in you wish it was *Already Over*. Somehow making a sequel was not *Bad for Business*, as far as Netflix was concerned. I you start watching I *bet u wanna* stop. A fun game would be to count *how many things* make you face-palm. At this point in the review, it should be obvious I am listed off songs from Sabrina Carpenter's *emails i can't send* album, as she has a small role. Take all the bad things from the first, and repackage them with the titular tall girl now suffer from anxiety and self-doubt and panic attacks! See characterization! A few supporting actors show a flash of tolerableness, but the whole thing is a giant mess. [Watched the first one], *Netflix*.

170. **Speak No Evil:** The film commits an unforgivable sin (especially with horror films): characters who behave in a dumb manner. The film is trying to be an expose on manners (and not speaking up), but it does not matter and 25 minutes into the film the viewer should lose all interest. If you are a vegetarian and someone offers you meat, you can turn it down. And yet these transgressions continue. Also to make matters worse, the viewer should know how it is roughly going to end. I can only assume the people that liked the movie are the same type of people who feel pressured to do things, even when they are not being pressured. But at least those real humans will have a back story on their social ineptitude. [Critic's Choice Super Awards – Best Horror Nominee].

169. **Benediction:** An absolute mess of a biopic. Not everyone involved should feel ashamed, but the blame is squarely on writer-director Terence Davies (A Quiet Passion). The script is a train wreck: dialogue that is self-indulgent and psuedo-intellectual (albeit there are a few laughs), characters who deliver the lines in the most monotone of voices, editing that shows no rhyme or reason except the film is semi-non-linear, and pacing that makes the gravitational formation of the earth from space dust seem quick. It is a shame as the cinematography is often rather good and the sets/costumes are nice. But, it is the definition of every bad independent film pretentious viewers enjoy. What could have been a wonderful study in loneliness, privilege, and homosexuality in Inter-War Britain becomes this repetitive and obvious slog. The viewer quickly realizes that the main character is gay (but doesn't fit into many of the conventions of the subculture). Yet, each individual difference must be show and dragged out. The positive reviews baffle me, this is one of the worst of year. Partially because unlike a lot in this range, this isn't even entertaining. [British Independent Film – Best Screenplay Nominee], *Hulu*.

168. **Black Adam:** The film had no idea what it wanted to be. It could have done down the *Deadpool* route of a dark and gory anti-hero comedy, but instead it was PG-13. It could have let Dwyane Johnson cook in the model of the *Thor* franchise, but that would have required more jokes and less fight scenes. It even could have attempted to be *Black Panther* and make important social statements, instead of semi doing so and being very upfront about it. What is left is a constant stream of CGI fights without any character development. It was another massive miss by DC. [Black Reel Awards – Breakthrough Actor Nominee], *HBOMax*.

167. **Senior Year:** The issue isn't that the film is bad, but it is not good. The assembled cast is let down by an unfunny and unoriginal script. Rebel Wilson, Sam Richardson, Mary Holland, Chris Parnell, and Angourie Rice should make for a better movie. It almost a shock that the film ended up only existing. Any commentary on social media and current high school life is surface level. The premise was good, the cast was good, and yet it ended up as a dud. [Dumb Netflix Watch], *Netflix*.

166. **Spin Me Round:** The issue isn't that the film is bad, but it is not good. The assembled cast is let down by an unfunny (but original) script. Alison Brie, Aubrey Plaza, Debby Ryan, Fred Armisen,

Zach Woods, Lil Rel Howery, and Molly Shannon should make for a better movie. There was some commentary to be made about rich men, but it gets forgotten in the lack of comedy. The premise was good, the cast was good, and yet it ended up as a dud. [Dumb Hulu Watch], *Hulu*.

165. **Uncharted:** The chemistry between Tom Holland and Mark Wahlberg is only good, not great. And the good moments between them are not plentiful enough. The film is a cheap *National Treasure* knock-off. The effects are not that good. For an action-adventure film, neither the action or adventure are good. [Dumb Netflix Watch], *Netflix*.

Tier 14: Avoidable, but at least One Good Thing

164. **Halloween Ends:** Not as bad as the second of the new series. Also not as good as the first of the new ones. The primary issue of the franchise remains the same: mass entertainment. The film needs to appeal to so many people that it can not dive deeper into issues. It attempts some (how do we control the evil inside of us?) but all are in-your-face (as most viewers are stupid). There was a good film to be made here with the concepts, but the end result was not it. The film is not spooky at all, and there are roughly zero scares. There is some mild gore, but even that seemed toned down. It is a shame that these didn't turn out well, but it should have been expected given the studio wanted to make money, not make good movies. [Halloween Franchise], *Amazon Prime*.

163. **Flux Gourmet:** Written and directed by Peter Strickland (*The Duke of Burgundy* and *In Fabric*), the film contains all of his worst elements with few of his better ones. The film primary suffers for the ever-present indie film issue of actors delivery dialogue in the most monotone pitch imaginable. Because of that, the film drags, and drags. And there are funny moments, but the viewer has simply tuned out. The voice-over about IBS gets stale. There is a solid, 'It's a Baby Ruth' joke. Yet most of these jokes get missed because of the acting and directing. [British Independent Film – Best Supporting Performer Nominee], *Hulu*.

162. **Charlotte:** For an animated film about an artist, the animation is appallingly poor. It did not need to be as innovative as *Loving Vincent*, but something better was needed. The animation looked bad and cheap. The emotional weight of Charlotte's life story can not come thru because as a viewer you'll tune out. Even when depicting her life story there is no character development, rather the plot is a series of (bad) things happening to her. Her motivations for staying (or leaving) are rarely explored. The film leaves you wanting to know more about this person and their art; partially because the film shined a light on a lesser-known Holocaust story, but also because the film did not do her or her art justice. [Annie Awards – Best Independent Film Nominee], *Hulu*.

161. **Bubble:** Although the anime often looks beautiful (except for some action sequences that look cheap or overly stylized), it falters because it is an in-you-face retelling of *The Little Mermaid*. It even has the character read the short story! There are a lot of jumbled themes that rarely come together (post-apocalypse with influencer culture!). Enjoy some nice animation, but avoid most everything else. [Netlfix Anime], *Netflix*.

160. **Asking for It:** *Promising Young Woman* on cocaine. The editing is all over the place (and often a distraction). There is minimal character development (sad given the quality of the cast). The plot jumps around a fair bit as well. It is a jumbled mess, but ignoring the editing, it is difficult to actively hate. [Solid Cast], *Hulu*.

159. **The Son:** Florian Zeller's follow-up to *The Father* is a massive flop. So massive, it might be worth considering if he is a one-hit-wonder. Hugh Jackman, Vanessa Kirby, and Laura Dern were good and did their best to breathe life into an awful script (both in terms of dialogue, character development and telling, not showing). Zen McGrath is not good as Jackman's teenage son (though how much is

his lack of talent, a poor script, and being surrounded by superior actors?). The worst thing I can say about this film involving depression and suicidal thoughts, is that an hour into the film I was actively rooting for the kid to kill himself; not only because the character was paper thin but because it would end my very real suffering of watching the film. [Golden Globe – Best Actor in a Drama Nominee].

158. **Bardo, False Chronicle of a Handful of Truths:** Alejandro Iñárritu (*The Revenant*) delivers a flop (this is the year of directors making flops, and features heavily in this tier). The film looks good and sounds good. Yet the plot is self-indulgent and overly long (the film is tour hours and forty minutes!). The film tries to keep things a mystery (which are only revealed in the final few moments), but even in the abstract scenes so much is forced upon the viewer: a conversation with his father about how he needed to hear his dad say he was proud of him, multiple lazy takes on wealth and opportunity, comments on immigration that are best classified as sophomoric. Unless you love visuals, the director, or enjoy foreign films avoid. [Oscars – Best Cinematography Nominee], *Netflix*.

157. **Rifkin's Festival:** Due to Covid and Woody Allen being Woody Allen the film was finally released in the US in 2022 so it is on this list and not previous years. As a fan of Woody Allen's *films*, it is sad to see another dud (*Irrational Man*, *Wonder Wheel*). Any late-career magic he found with *Midnight in Paris* and *Blue Jasmine* is gone. This film is a poor rehashing of is usual themes; European Classics of the 1950s and 60s, neurosis, sex-on-the-mind, etc. This film could have been a rough draft of *Annie Hall* or *Manhattan*, that is how little new material there in it (admittedly the homages to classic films were nice). There were some decent jokes but not nearly enough; and many were delivered poorly by Wallace Shawn (*Toy Story*). Although a long-time regular of Allen films, he is not up to carrying the film. One imagines he happily cashed the check and the vacation to San Sebastian. [Woody Allen].

156. **Amsterdam:** The faults are squarely on David O Russell's script. The film is overly long, with more talking than action. The film is very self-aggrandizing; look I am about a plot to overthrow the President! Corporations control everything! The themes are painfully front-and-center, but someone they have a hard time coming thru because the script is that bad. The massive assembly of acting talent can do very little with it (Christian Bale, Margot Robbie, and Anya Taylor-Joy do their best; the other actors are enjoyable as well but as good). To make matters worse, for a film with so much dialogue, it is mixed horribly—half of Bale's lines are impossible to hear. Russell is responsible for this bomb, and following *Joy*, his career is beginning to look suspect. Hopefully he finds his form again, but perhaps he needs someone else to write scripts. This year is highlighted by a lot of marquee directors making thoroughly mediocre (if not outright bad) movies. [BAFTA – Best Costume Design Nominee], *HBOMax*.

155. **Blonde:** The faults are with Andrew Dominik's (*The Assassination of Jesse James*) script. For someone as famous as Marilyn Monroe the film felt the need to completely fabricate multiple portions of her life (how much is taken from the source novel I do not know). The issue is that by time the third fabrication is shown the viewer has lost interest (the film is no longer a character of Monroe but of make-believe overly-tragic version of Monroe); not to mention there is still over two hours left when this realization occurs. Monroe lived a tragic life, there is no need to invent new tragedies for her. Ana de Armas is extremely good and does her best to hold the film together, but even she can't keep it tolerable. Some of the film's shots are nice, but the constant changing of aspect ratios and the switches from color to black and white becoming annoying. [Oscars – Best Actress Nominee], *Netflix*.

154. **Deep Water:** Things that are as bad as thrillers that are not thrilling: i) comedies that are not funny, ii) clowns that are neither funny nor scary, iii) porn that is softcore. This (erotic) thriller is not thrilling and it isn't that erotic (*Voyeur* and *Trust* both at least pulled the genre off). Most of

the issue lies with Sam Levinson's script (both this and *Malcom & Marie* are not good and the fault lies with him; someone please explain *Euphoria* to me). The direction is not great either, as it does not build suspense. But it is hard to build suspense when the script does not build it either. Also, somehow neither Ben Affleck nor Ana de Armas are that good in the film either, which seems wrong. [Affleck and de Armas], *Hulu*.

153. **Sissy:** A film that might rank higher, but it lost me instantly; by quickly trying to have it's cake and eat it too. The film wants its lead to be a sympathetic character, but while also parodying influence culture. Either the character is loser or deserving of our pity (yes, complex characters can exist, but when going for a satire; no). Because of that disconnect, it baffles me that people praised the performance of Aisha Dee. It doesn't help that the jokes rarely land. But it is the muddling of the main character that makes the film unwatchable (some kids deserved to be bullied, and some people deserve to be ostracized from society). It also doesn't help that the supporting characters are paper thin as well (in many ways this film is simply a far inferior *Bodies, Bodies, Bodies*). [AACTA – Best Film Nominee].

152. **Matriarch:** Slow even at 85 minutes, especially when the first 25 minutes is overly-long character development. The audience quickly figures out who the main character is, but needs another twenty minutes repeating it. The sound is bad in that voices are muffled. For the longest time the film pretends to be a psychological family-trauma horror before veering into folk horror and body horror. That disconnect between the start and the ending does not help things either. [Decently-reviewed Horror], *Hulu*.

151. **Dashcam:** The found footage Covid film isn't that scary, and the camerawork is (literally) shaky. So shaky it puts other found footage to shame, the viewer might even get motion sickness watching. A lot of the criticism was leveled at the main character (who is an over-the-top MAGA), and the character is too-much, but they are correct about the uselessness of hand sanitizer during Covid (and that it is okay to touch things). The real problems with the film are that it isn't scary and it feels long at 66 minutes (of actual film, there is an extended credits sequence). It is over-reliant on jump scares, and a 'monster' that can't keep the viewer intrigued. [Controversial Horror Film], *Hulu*.

150. **Nitram:** A film that is certainly better than my ranking. Yet the film hits on my pet peeve. It is about a young man with an obvious intellectual disability. Quickly in the film we see him giving fireworks to children, mildly harassing a parent, and grabbing the steering wheel while someone is driving. The person is a threat to society (because of his lack of intelligence). But his father still loves him and the quirky (crazy?) wealthy lady he befriends still does as well. Any attempt at sympathize the titular Nitram is lost on me (even his Mother says, 'how could anyone that isn't [your parents] ever love you?' and she is right!). Now, if you are not as cold-hearted as myself (see my review for *The Surrogate*; I am consistent on this issue) this could be an emotionally powerful film. [AACTA – Best Film Winner], *Hulu*

149. **My Father's Dragon:** The film is fundamentally a children's film. It does not matter that the background animation often looks rather good. It is a Dora the Explorer-plot, with no sense of timing or space. It is also over a hour-and-forty-minutes, so unlike other nonsensical children's movies on the list, it wears out its welcome far before the end credits. The voice cast had some big names, yet none of them are allow to shine ad that would require developing the supporting characters met along the journey. [Annie Awards – Best Independent Feature Nominee], *Netflix*.

148. **Don't Worry Darling:** Florence Pugh and Chris Pine wanted nothing to do with the publicity for the film. And yet, they were the two best parts of the film (the costumes and set design also rank up there). Yet it is impossible to not see the flaws are often due to Olivia Wilde's directing. The goodwill created after *Booksmart* is almost gone. A prime example is when Pugh's character hallucinates the walls closing in on her. As a viewer wouldn't realize she feels trapped and constrained without that!

Also, don't cast your boy toy in an important role. Harry Styles was not good and could not carry the load needed from his character (he also has a British accent that would come and go). The script is poor; adding nothing new to its genre. The film wants to set up this great ending, and yet it falls flat. There was a good movie to be made here, Pugh and Pine gave it their all, and the end result was still bad. [Olivia Wilde's follow-up to *Booksmart*], *HBOMax*.

147. **The Gray Man:** The film is not bad, at no point do you hate yourself for watching it. Yet, the entire time you know you've seen this exact movie hundreds of times before. There is nothing new, nothing special. The film is an amalgamation of every spy-action movie ever made. Characters are paper thin. The writing is poor. Perhaps a large chunk of the negative reviews are lamenting what could have been, as the cast is wasted. Ryan Gosling is enjoyable but has no character to work with. Ana de Armas is decent, but has nothing to work with. Billy Bob Thorton has zero to work with and I assume he decided to play himself. Chris Evans is outlandish and decided to lean into the absurdity. He overacts and somehow it isn't offensive as at least it provides the film with a character. Alfre Woodward (*Clemency*) wants to be good, but also has nothing to work with. Yet, if Gosling and de Armas return for the sequel, I'll probably watch it one night to turn my brain off. [Netflix Action Movie], *Netflix*.

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Tier 13: Mainly Fun-ish and Unoffensive

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146. **Minions: The Rise of Gru:** Possibly the definition of a film that exists. There are some funny moments, but no where near the amount in the original *Minions* film. The plot is technically a plot, but the stakes seem minimal and any character development (or additional backstory) is lacking. Luckily the film is only 88 minutes so by time you are about to grow tired of it, it mercifully is over. [PGA – Best Animated Film Nominee], *Netflix*.

145. **You Are Not My Mother:** The second folk horror from the British Isles that I watched on Hulu. It is slightly better, but most of the criticism apply: slow, not that scary, poor plot, etc. Ironically the mother disappears quickly (yet the film is still slow!), yet this further hurts the film as it is impossible to notice a transformation in the mother (she was depressed and moody, then becomes moody-er with mood swings). The subplot with the bullies technically serves a purpose but is forced and cliché. Even at 90 minutes the film feels long; there have simply been many more well-made family trauma and mental illness horror films made in recent years. [Well-reviewed Horror], *Hulu*.

144. **Honk for Jesus. Save Your Soul.:** A mockumentary of mega-churches that is never as funny as it thinks it is. Sterling K Brown and Regina Hall (*Support the Girls*) put in a solid effort and help keep the film afloat. Nicole Beharie (*Miss Juneteenth*) is also good in a small supporting role. The costumes are rather good, though one wonders how many were designed for the film vs picked out from a Prada shop. You can't help wish the film was funnier though. [Black Reel Awards – Best Actor Nominee], *Amazon Prime*.

143. **Let the Wrong One In:** An Irish comedy-horror that only has a few laughs. The laughs that land are funny, but there is a real lack of them. There is some heart to the film (well, besides stabbing vampires thru the heart), and that helps. Though it often feels the characters are undeveloped. The film is set in Ireland and at times is too-aggressively Irish. Some of the practical effects are enjoyable. One wishes they made better use of the heroin junkie–vampire connection; the family falling apart (and then coming back together) due to addiction. It hints at that premise, but never really gets into (see the underdeveloped characters). Also, some of the actors were not funny either. [Well-reviewed Horror-Comedy].

142. **Lyle, Lyle, Crocodile:** The film is a children's film. There isn't much here for adults. It also doesn't help that I do not see the appeal in Shawn Mendes (especially as the signing voice of a crocodile).

Javier Bardem (*No Country for Old Men*) embraces the looniness of his role and is rather enjoyable. Constance Wu (*Crazy Rich Asians*) is a delight as always. Brett Gelman (*Stranger Things*) plays a version of the character he has perfected over the years. You'll rarely dislike the movie, but it doesn't offer besides harmless fun. [Popcorn Movie], *Netflix*.

141. **Spirited:** It is difficult to make an awful movie with Ryan Reynolds and Will Ferrell. That does not mean this is a good movie. It certainly has its flaws; the over two-hour run time is the worst of the bunch (it seems to have about five total endings, and it keeps going). Not all of the jokes land. Neither Reynolds nor Ferrell are particularly excellent singers (it is a musical)—a fact the film tries to hide with outlandish dance numbers in the background (admittedly the light one is cool looking). It all adds up to a film that isn't awful, but isn't particularly enjoyable. But perhaps next winter season, it would be worth watching instead of your standard mediocre family holiday movie for the fiftieth time. [My Friends Wanted to Watch It], *AppleTV+*.

140. **Anything's Possible:** A film I am potentially too hard on because of its one major sin. Being about a guy dates a trans girl in high school, despite both knowing her other friend had a crush on him. It a new (and diverse) take on a high school coming-of-age/love story, so a lot of the cliches can be forgiven (college essays, making YouTube videos, etc). Yet the sin is after a brief verbal spat in the girls bathroom the (ex) best-friend trips and breaks a single finger. Eventually, to get revenge she starts a campaign for a bathroom ban. It simple does not work, feels slightly dated, and overly cliche (I get teens are brutal, but it seemed overly harsh out of no where). Eva Reign was good as the lead. Yet anything different for how the friends fell apart would have worked and let this film rank much higher (as it was nice and mildly heart-warming, with enough newness on genre, albeit it aimed low). [GLAAD – Outstanding Streaming Film Nominee], *Amazon Prime*.

139. **Brian and Charles:** A one-note film that manages to stretch itself out for 90 minutes. It starts out as a mockumentary, but then is slowly forgets it is one (camera placement would be nonsensical if a mockumentary). The quirky humor quickly runs dry. The supporting characters are paper thin and rehashes of bad tropes: the town bully and the equally-awkward love interest. It wants to be quirky, funny, and fell-good, yet it ends up being a mild chore. [BAFTA – Outstanding British Film Nominee], *Brian and Charles*, *Amazon Prime*.

138. **Not Okay:** Quinn Shephard's (*Blame*) second film, and it does not come together. It has some interesting things to day (or at least it wanted to) about online culture. Yet the film seems like a half-baked idea. It frequently runs out of steam until the next change in the plot. Luckily for the film, both Zoey Deutch and Mia Isaac are great and practically carry the film (Isaac is certainly someone to watch). Some of the jokes land, but there needed to be more of them (again, the film frequently stalls out). Sit back, and enjoy Deutch being good. [Zoey Deutch], *Hulu*.

137. **White Noise:** Another film in the year of flops by marquee directors. This time Noah Baumbach (*Marriage Story*) is at fault. His script is not good. Adapting any post-modernist novel is difficult, as the genre does not lend itself to easy film adaptations (some of its novelty is the structure of the story and its writing conventions, neither of which easily translate into film). The production design is rather good. Adam Driver is rather good (as always). Yet, the film is a slog, and puts its various themes too front-and-center. [Golden Globes – Best Actor in a Musical or Comedy Nominee], *Netflix*.

136. **Apollo 10 1/2: A Space Age Childhood:** The film is essential a forty minute short, with an hour of late-60s nostalgia forced into it. Written and Directed by Richard Linklater (*Boyhood*, *Before* trilogy), it is more an ode to his own childhood than a coherent vision for a film (compare to *The Cathedral* farther down on the list). The animation is okay, but nothing worth praising. There a reason a Linklater film went unnoticed, and unless you love the 60s or Linklater, you are probably best letting it go unnoticed. [Richard Linklater], *Netflix*.

135. **Bosch & Rockit:** Also called *Ocean Boy* and one film that might technically needed to be on my 2023 list based on US-release. But with streaming releases and the openness of the internet, that it harder to keep straight. Luke Hemsworth is the best part of the film, followed by Australian beaches. The plot is basic, and does not develop the supporting characters. The plot is also often artificially propelled forward by external events. It does not help that there are a few editing issues (I assume they only got a few days to shoot the surfing scenes, and if the surf was poor that day the film had to use the older shots). And some of the fish-eye panning shots get annoying. [AACTA Awards – Best Sound Nominee].

134. **Strange World:** The animated film has the exact plot you'd think it would have ten minutes into the film. The plot is an unoriginal as possible. I assume the writers were hoping to get bailed out by having an interracial couple with a gay son as the leads. The film does a good job with that diversity, but it is not done in a way that adds to plot. The film would have been the exact if the son was straight and both parents were white. The animation is decent, but mostly because of the color palate; not the details. There is an enjoyable ending, even if it shoves the themes down your throat (and viewers are able to quickly pick up on it). [GLAAD – Best Streaming Release Nominee], *Disney+*.

133. **A Man Called Otto:** The film does exactly what you think it will do. The cranky old man, remembers he has a big heart. There are far too many kids-these-days and -back-in-my-day bits, almost all of which are cringe-inducing (though the film knows its audience is older people and it plays to them). It tries to be multi-cultural – Otto helps his Hispanic neighbor, his black neighbor, a trans kid – yet it comes across as hoping old people realize other people are indeed people. At slightly over two hours the film is long and drags. The heart-warming moments are heart-warming though so it can rank here instead of much farther down. [GLAAD – Best Wide Release Nominee].

132. **Beast:** I have been supportive of the survivalist subgenre of a person being stranding and fighting off a deadly animal (*The Shallows* and *Crawl*), but this incarnation is not it. Idris Elba does his best to carry the film, but there is not enough character development in the script. The director Baltasar Kormákur adds multiple lengthy continuous (or edited to appear continuous) shots. Both are trying to elevate the film. But the script is simply not good. The casting director also whiffed on the young daughters, the youngest actress is nowhere near up to the task and at times actively detracts from the film. But Elba does fight a CGI lion so it does have that going for it. [Idris Elba Fights a Lion], *Amazon Prime*.

131. **A Perfect Pairing:** The script is beyond cliché. The boss scolds an employee for having balloons at their desk. On their birthday (a well-placed card gives the implication). The rest of the film proceeds similarly and predictably. Yet Victoria Justice (*Trust*) is charming enough for the film to at least rank here. The chemistry between her and Adam Demos is good (that or they are both hot people and watching hot people fall in love is generally a good time). It isn't exactly trash, but it sorta is. [Netflix Rom-com with Victoria Justice], *Netflix*.

130. **Death on the Nile:** The film suffers from a lot of the same problems found in *Murder on the Orient Express*: i) slow plots (it takes forever to get going), ii) a plodding plot (interview characters one-by-one), iii) a great cast but very few of which are given full characters to portray. The only standout is Emma Mackay (her English-language film debut). Though given point iii, is it simply because her character has the most development? But she does manage to steal the show from such heavy-hitters as Gal Gadot and Armie Hammer. This franchise isn't bad, and as long as amazing casts can be assembled they'll remain tolerable. Though the poor VFX and green screens are starting to get grating. There is also a spoiler issue (taken from the source material) that doesn't hold up as well in the modern era. [Solid Cast], *Hulu*.

129. **Rosaline:** Full disclaimer: I am not a fan of Shakespeare and therefore only have the rough outline of the plot to *Romeo and Juliet*. I could have missed a few in-jokes. But the main issue is that the film is not funny. The script simply isn't that good. There are multiple moments where you are suppose to laugh. Except the joke wasn't funny. The worst example is the repeated hair-stuck-in-earrings gag (it is used to eventually further the plot, but not funny remains not funny). Kaitlyn Devers (*Booksmart* and *Short Term 12*) is the only reason to watch the film. The other actors are rather hit-or-miss; Sean Teale is decent. The film only partially embraced the absurdity that is the plot of the source material (the Romeo overacts, and the Juliet is all over the place). Perhaps the largest reason it is not funny is the inability to be R-rated. By sticking to PG-13 a few of the jokes are merely (unfunny) suggestions. It hard to mock horny teens when the only teenagers allowed to watch the film without a parental chaperon are the same age as Juliet. [Hulu Rom-com with Kaitlyn Devers], *Hulu.*

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Tier 12: Mainly Fun and Unoffensive

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128. **Lightyear:** The animation is really good, as you'd expect from Pixar. Yet, the rest of the films seems mediocre (except for the cat). One item the films could have done was taken advantage of 'being made' in 1995 (the film is the film Andy saw in *Toy Story* causing him to fall in love with Buzz). And yet, there the film does not have anything resembling the 90s in it (even if set in the future). Somehow, worse yet, the film is clearly made today (there are lesbians, and black people). This is a good thing, yet there was no acknowledgement of how bad the 90s were relative to today. It also doesn't help that the plot was predictable. [GLAAD – Best Wide Release Nominee], *Disney+.*

127. **DC League of Super-Pets:** A mediocre family-friendly film with a voice-cast that cashed checks. Looking at the voice cast, it is a who's-who of famous people, yet most all of them phoned their performance in. Dwyane Johnson is meh as Krypto. Kevin Hart doesn't bring much to his character (and is probably miscast). Kate McKinnon appeared to be doing a Tina Fey impression? Natasha Lyonne is in the film because I assume Merryl Streep wouldn't sink this low. The portrayal of Batman is a bad ripoff of *Lego Batman* and does not work at all in the context of the Justice League. [Critic's Choice – Best Superhero Movie Nominee], *HBOMax.*

126. **Emancipation:** Most all of the issues with the film are due to the script. From playing fast-and-loose with historical facts to being too long (a dip with 30 minutes left is poorly placed within the film), it needed work. Will Smith is nothing special, if anything Ben Foster (*Hell or High Water*, *Leave No Trace*, and *The Messenger*) was the best actor in the film. The film looks amazing and is *not* in black-and-white. Instead it is in a desaturated color palette giving the impression of black-and-white. There is some great tacking and crane shots, as you'd expect from cinematographer Robert Richardson. Though the frequency of the slow-motion shots does detract, but I assume that a choice made by the director. [Black Reel Awards – Best Cinematography Nominee], *AppleTV+.*

125. **Black Panther Wakanda Forever:** The film does a good job of honoring Chadwick Boseman (the two moments do hit hard). But that wraps up the noteworthy items from the film. Angela Basset is good, and her Oscar is more of a lifetime achievement award (and in a weak year for the category). The visual effects are not that good, especially in light of *Avatar*. The underwater society in *Panther* looks bad relative to *Avatar*, while watching anything underwater, you wish you were watching *Avatar* instead. Though perhaps the greatest flaw of the film is that it is an MCU film. The film shoe-horns another Marvel character into the plot, and at a pivotal moment in the film is unable to have a character act in the way they've been hinting at. And yet in the mid-credit scene, the film still hints at still needing the forgone character development. As unlike some films in this tier, the issues are that it could have been much better. Other big budgets here knew what they wanted to be and more or less hit their mark. The film seemed more like a Marvel production and not a Ryan Coogler production. [Oscars – Best Supporting Actress Nominee], *Disney+.*

124. **Bullet Train:** A film that could easily be a tier lower, or a tier higher—depending how much to ding the film for the multitude of plot holes and breaking the rules of physics. There are not many to start, but about halfway thru the film they start piling up, and some are egregious. These detract a lot from the film. Yet, the film is fun. Brad Pitt is a bankable leading man for a reason and could have carried the film even if the rest of the cast was bad. Luckily, the entire cast is good. Joey King is good, and hopefully serves as a springboard from her previous teen-comedy roles. Brian Tyree Henry (*Atlanta*) shows his range in this role. Michael Shannon even makes an appearance. The film is fun, so fun it makes up for a lot of issues. [Critic's Choice Super Awards – Best Action Movie Nominee], *Netflix*.

123. **Wendell and Wild:** The stop-motion animation is good, not great. Other films out recently have done it better. The film is great, if the audience is kids under 13. It address a lot of important social issues. But the film is rather upfront about the social issues to the point that the film offers almost nothing for adults. It is very explicit about the evils of private prisons, and the school-to-prison pipeline (and the prison company is called Klax Korp, as I assume the Ku Klux Klan woulda sued for trademark infringement otherwise). The voice should have done a better job given their talents. There are animated films that tackle important issues in far subtler ways, and they rank above this one for that reason. [Annie Awards – Best Animated Feature Nominee], *Netflix*.

122. **Enola Holmes 2:** As someone who enjoyed the first film, there was a slight tone shift that made it inferior. The first film had its flaws (cheap VFX, in-your-face themes) and these continue, perhaps the women's rights got a tad more up-front. But the whimsy in the first film seems to have been lost in a shift to a slightly more serious tone with higher stakes. The mystery becomes super easy to solve (perhaps with the less whimsy it becomes easier to focus in on the plot). They are almost certainly make another and I'll watch it. But the switch to a more serious, slightly-more-adult franchise is not what I enjoyed about the first. Millie Bobbie Brown and Henry Cavill were still enjoyable. [Sequel], *Netflix*.

121. **The Adam Project:** Ryan Reynolds does Ryan Reynolds things. Therefore the film is fun. Some of the plot is silly (it is a time travel film after all). The effects are not the best. The jet sequences pale in comparison to another film on this list. Jennifer Garner is in the film, but could have been given more character development. Mark Ruffalo has nailed the professor character after years in the MCU. The film found a kid in Walker Scobell that can go toe-to-toe with Reynolds and that helps the film the most. [Critic's Choice Super Awards – Best Actor in Action Movie Nominee], *Netflix*.

120. **Thor: Love and Thunder:** The film is essentially *Ragnarok* all over again, and that is a good thing. Taika Waititi has revitalized the franchise, and hopefully they keep churning these out. The cast is amazing; Natalie Portman is back, and Christian Bale is the villain. One imagines most of the 250 million budget went to actor's salaries (Russell Crowe even makes an appearance, and the cameos are far too long to list). Though your enjoyment of the screaming goats will probably affect your view of the film. The franchise is back to being fun. [Critic's Choice Super Awards – Best Superhero Movie Nominee], *Disney+*.

119. **Dr Strange and the Multiverse of Madness:** Other Marvel-adjacent films and other films on this list used the multiverse setting too far greater good. There are a little over two reasons to watch this film: Benedict Cumberbatch and Elizabeth Olsen, plus the brief appearance of Rachel McAdams (who is stuck playing a character the writers forgot to develop). There are bonuses for fan of Marvel, but that reflects the worrying trend of the franchise—more interest on new fan-service than creating good films. Continuing with the downfall of the Marvel franchise, the over-the-top CGI fights are still cranked up to eleven. But that is the state of the franchise: fan-service and CGI, and being hopefully bailed out by good actors who got that bag. [Critic's Choice Super Awards – Best Superhero Movie Nominee], *Disney+*.

118. **Nude Tuesday:** The film has an absurdest premise that sadly runs its course too quickly. All the characters speak a fictional (but at times similar to English) language. There are subtitles written by someone who was not involved in the filming; they have a few good jokes. The story is the familiar tale of a middle-aged couple going thru a rough patch, who attend a couples retreat to spruce up their love life and marriage. The fake language helps disguise most of the familiarity at first, and the jokes help keep the film enjoyable. Yet as the film progresses the shine of the experimental approach starts wearing off and jokes land less frequently. [AACTA – Best Screenplay Nominee].

117. **The Rise of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: The Movie:** One's ranking of this film will depending on how the poor plot is balanced against the solid animation, great voice acting, and a few good jokes (any film that insults Staten Island deserves a bump in ranking). Yet, the plot are character development are up front (and designed for children to follow). Luckily the colors are great, the design of the titular turtles are good (some backgrounds look cheap). Ben Schwartz adds a lot of depth to Leonardo, and is a perfect fit for the character. [Annie Awards – Outstanding Character Design Nominee], *Netflix*.

116. **The Lost King:** The script apparently takes some liberties with historical accuracy, but that is not the main issue with the script. There simply is no suspense in looking for the remains of a King of England. The film proceeds matter-of-factly but without much 'ah ha!' moments, the hunt for the bones merely progresses. Sally Hawkins (*The Shape of Water*, *Paddington*) does a great job, but the film is more interested in her character's 'vibes' (often to the detriment of the plot). It is this odd middle ground of portraying a real hunt and a feel-good feminist character story of the woman who helped with the discovery. Both could have been done at the same time, yet this film never combined both properly. [British Independent Film – Best Lead Performance Nominee].

115. **Dog:** Five minutes into the film the view knows exactly how it will end. And yet, the hour-and-forty minutes is still enjoyable. Partially because Channing Tatum has perfected the role he plays in the film. Also, it is hard to hate a good-looking dog. The film is more conservative than you'd expect (with some jabs at Portland, San Francisco, and Los Angeles). Bill Burr is great in a brief role. [Feel-good Popcorn Movie], *Amazon Prime*.

Tier 11: Films that Wanted to Be Great, but Weren't (and Solid Easy-Watches)

114. **Empire of Light:** The film does not know what it wants to be. It has many good parts—that are good in isolation. Yet their collection seems forced and trying to mention multiple social issues. Olivia Coleman's character has mental health issues and is harassed by her boss (played by Colin Firth). There is a new black worker who must deal with racism. However these puzzle pieces rarely fit together. The film does look great as Deakins is the cinematographer. [Oscars – Best Cinematography Nominee], *HBOMax*.

113. **The Good Nurse:** The viewer quickly gets the goings-on of the film. It feels that it would have worked better as an investigative film, instead of focusing on the friendship of the two nurses. The cast is solid, Jessica Chastain and Eddie Redmayne lead with Nnamdi Asomugha (The Oakland Raiders and *Crown Heights*) and Noah Emmerich (*The Americans*) rounding the cast out. Yet in the two hour, not much happens. Yes the police are stifled by hospital administration, but it lacks the impact of the others in the investigative genre. The film does attempt to give Redmayne's character depth (though it could be Redmayne's talent) to avoid all the cliches, though it hits a few of them. [SAG Awards – Best Supporting Actor Nominee], *Netflix*.

112. **Master:** A film for people who thought *Get Out* was both too scary and didn't make sure the audience got the racial messages. For a horror (adjacent?), it was rarely scary. The racial messages are not hidden at all (the librarian wants to check the black student's bag, black faculty are stopped

by campus police—none of these are subtle). The film also veers off into other messages (the general stress of college being the main one) but fails at really bringing those home. Without spoiling, the film then gives itself an out, but even with that out it fails to make a deep comment on race. [Black Reel Awards – Outstanding Independent Film Nominee], *Amazon Prime*.

111. **Queen of Glory:** The film showcases the talent of *actor* Nana Mensah and the lack of talent of *writer* Nana Mensah. For as good as she is acting in this film, her script is bad. All but two characters are either clichés or paper-thin. Even the character she is playing is poorly written. The film wants to say something about the immigrant experience but it never does so in a satisfactory manner. I could go on about how much it gets wrong about graduate school and the dissertation process (perhaps those early errors made me check out sooner than most). [Independent Film – Best First Feature Nominee].

110. **M3gan:** The film is better than the trailers and January wide-release date would imply. Though the reviews oversell the film as everyone went in with such low expectations. The film hurt by being PG-13 (though perhaps there is an argument for more 'approachable' horror films for younger people); as mild spoiler: there are only five kills, one of which is off-screen (and they are not as cool as another film on this list that does not take itself seriously). There is enough depth and character development to help the film along (far more than you'd ever anticipate). Some of the anti-tech themes are annoying. Surely this will spawn a new horror-comedy franchise and I'm willing to sit thru a few more of them. [Well-reviewed Horror], *Peacock*.

109. **I Used to be Famous:** An extremely predictable film about a former-boy band leader who is down on his luck until he meats teenage drummer with autism. You can practically write the rest of the film. There is enough character development so you avoid banging your head against the wall. And it ends up being moving at times (even when you know it is coming). It isn't as moving as some of the other one-dimensional films in this tier and the next, hence its placement here. [British Independent Film – Breakthrough Performance Nominee], *Netflix*.

108. **The Survivor:** A Holocaust biopic that loses its way. Much of the first half is about Haft's boxing career; both the willing career in the US and forced 'career' in concentration camps. With the frequent jumps from post-war to the Holocaust, the editing needed to be better (the Holocaust sequences are in black-and-white and frequently look good-not-great. Ben Foster (*Leave No Trace*) is good in the leading role, and Vicky Krieps (*Phantom Thread*) is nice, but one wishes she had more to do (not to mention Danny DeVito briefly playing a boxing trainer! and a few other solid actors). The issue with the film is that it bogs down after Haft stops boxing and settles down to marry. Although it has somewhere to still go, it trudges along after the sails have been taken out. It wants to add something new to the crowded genre, but it fails to really deliver on it. [Critic's Choice – Best Streaming Film Nominee], *HBOMax*.

107. **Operation Mincemeat:** The film is a standard war/espionage drama. The cast is solid (led by Colin Firth), but few of them are given much in the way of characterization. Except for the forced (and historically inaccurate) love-triangle that was thrown in. Luckily the film never feels long (a little over two hours). There have been better British war dramas (*Their Finest* and *Darkest Hour*), but this is familiar, follows genre conventions, and leaves little to be upset about. [Well-reviewed Historic Drama], *Netflix*.

106. **Matilda the Musical:** Your mileage will probably be a function of your enjoyment of the story. If you enjoy its whimsy, there is a lot to like. If you fall into the camp of the entire story being over-the-top and clearly never happening it a lot harder to stay involved. Emma Thompson is rather good as the villainess and embraces the absurdity of the role. The other adult characters are decent, but no one holds a candle to Thompson. Some of the musical numbers are good, but no stand outs. Sets are solid. [BAFTA – Outstanding British Film Nominee], *Netflix*.

105. **Crush:** A funny teenage high school LGBT romance. The genre is crowded (and even the LGBT subgenre is starting to get crowded), and it does not bring much new. Most of the characters have more in common with *Who's Line* audience suggestions than actual characters. Yet, these one-quirk characters are played by great comedians: Aasif Mandvi (*The Daily Show*), Megan Mullally (*Parks and Recreation*), Michelle Buteau, and Eric Edelstein. The adults are funnier than the teens. Rowan Blanchard (*Girl Meets World*) and Auli'i Cravalho (*All Together Now*) are decent. It doesn't matter that you've seen the plot before, it matters that a fair bit of the jokes land. Especially everything Megan Mullally does. [GLAAD – Outstanding Streaming Film Nominee], *Hulu.*

104. **Three Thousand Years of Longing:** Tilda Swinton and Idris Elba are both rather good. But for George Miller's first film after *Fury Road* it is a mild miss. There are multiple great shots and edits. Let the film bogs down with the story telling of previous types of Djinn granted wishes; the best part of the film is Swinton and Elba. When there is no Swinton in the flashbacks the film suffers. By time the flashbacks are finished, the film wraps up far too quickly. There are a lot of themes the film tries to tackle, but few of them can come thru because the pacing is amiss. [AACTA – Best Film Nominee].

103. **Elvis:** In a gap in my movie-watching, I had never seen a film by Baz Luhrmann (*Romeo + Juliet*, *Moulin Rouge!*, and *The Great Gatsby*). The maximalist, always-turned-up-to-eleven directing style became grating after 20ish minutes. Though the primary issue of the film is that is attempts to fully white-wash Elvis' career by putting all of the blame on cartoon villain Col Tom Parker, played by Tom Hanks. Tom Hanks is awful in this. So bad the Academy should consider taking back an Oscar. All of Elvis' sins: i) hooking up with a fourteen-year-old girl, ii) his drug addiction, iii) his crazy pro-cop anti-hippie everything at the end, are all glossed over or blamed solely on Parker. Austin Butler (*Zoey 101*) was rather good and helped to offset all of the multiple flaws already listed. [Oscars – Best Picture Nominee], *HBOMax.*

102. **Triangle of Sadness:** The film is two-and-a-half hours. *The White Lotus* currently has two seasons with roughly thirteen hours of entertainment. *Triangle* is an inferior and quickly cobbled together *Lotus.* The themes about inequality and sexuality are stated plain as day. Writer–director Ruben Östlund prefers to show *and tell* the audience what is happening and why the audience should care about inequality. Admittedly the film does have one of the funniest sequences in recent memory, and the third act is an improvement. Yet, the film as a while is overly long, and really makes sure the audience gets the message(s). [Oscars – Best Picture Nominee], *Hulu.*

101. **Babylon:** Another film in a long line this year of major misses by major directors. Damien Chazelle (*La La Land*) does not deliver (and in many moments makes the viewer actively wish they were watching *La La Land*; there are arguments that this film is overdoing the good parts of the his previous LA-set film: film nostalgia, making it big in Hollywood, Jazz, intricate dance numbers impeccably shot). The film is far too bloated the three hour run time desperately needed to be cut down. The entire lengthy opening party sequence is a maximialistic (and grotesque) chore. The film wants to contrast itself with the silent-sound transition portrayed in *Singin' in the Rain* by showing the dark underbelly of Hollywood (the silent era had its share of scandals), but in repeatedly doing so the themes are far too heavy-handed. The rest of the script is a sprawling mess. There are far too many characters (the Black Jazz player takes up too much time for only a brief pay-off, Jean Smart's character isn't needed; and Smart isn't that good in the role either). There is a good film to be made about the darker-side of Hollywood in the 1920s and 1930s, but this is not the film. The cast is an all-start cast, but few of them do much acting: Brad Pitt plays the same character as he did in *Basterds* and *Hollywood.* Margot Robbie is decent, but unfortunately her character is not developed. Samara Weaving (*Ready or Not*) was enjoyable in a brief role. This film makes the viewer long for *La La Land* and *Signin',* not because those films are more uplifting and positive, but because they

have something to say with characters that have been skillfully developed, and actors showcasing their talents. [Oscars – Best Production Design Nominee], *Paramount+*.

100. **Turning Red:** The glowing reviews for this film are baffling as it is deeply flawed. I would go as far to say even some of the marginal positive reviews were purposely goosed-up to avoid claims of racism or sexism on the part of the reviewer. The main character is rather irritating and poorly written; all of the opening sequence is painful to watch. The mother is a caricature of a caricature. The script is bad. The story was nice, but the script needed to be taken away from writer-director Domee Shi (*Bao*). There was a line so bad about the power of friendship, any sane person would want to rage quit the film; not to mention a deus ex machina to set up the final act that makes the viewer contemplate invading Canada to exact revenge on what they were forced to watch. The symbolism of the panda veers between periods, general puberty, and repressed feelings, but for the most part it still works (despite opening up a few plot holes). Luckily the feel does come close to redeeming itself in the final act with enough emotional impact to let the film rank here. Yet it seems Pixar thought they had the next *Inside Out* or *Coco* on their hands, instead the end result was a mild dud, representative of Pixar's declining quality. [Oscars – Best Animated Film Nominee], *Disney+*.

Tier 10: Hodgepodge of Films that Have Something, but Not Much Else

99. **The African Desperate:** The film is experimental at times, taking ideas from the world of contemporary art and incorporating them into a film. Some of the freshness (how FaceTime is shown and the incorporation of inner dialogue memes) works. The film even starts off with a tense thesis defense that has a lot to say about race and gender. But after that, the film loses its way. The plot is primarily drug trip after drug trip. The various characters are rarely developed either. It is nice to see a film taking risks, but the whole of the film often does not work. And depending if you want to punish the lack of clarity in the plot and character development, the film could easily rank a tier (or two) lower. [Independent Spirit – John Cassavetes Award Nominee].

98. **Something in the Dirt:** The fifth film by Justin Benson and Aaron Moorhead (*Spring*, *The Endless*, and *Synchronic*). It is the worst of their efforts so far. It tries to bite off a lot (the male loneliness ends up being the best theme and the one it should have explored that a little more), and the documentary film-within-a-film (or is the entire thing the documentary?) comes off okay, but it could have been better (the viewer never fully has to deal with what was initially real and what was not). The sci-fi aspect also does not fully come together, which also hurts the ending. Benson and Moorhead are still making some of the most creative sci-fi films, but you should go watch those instead. [Independent Spirit – John Cassavetes Award Nominee], *Hulu*.

97. **Bodies Bodies Bodies:** A horror-comedy that is short on laughs and horror. Even as someone who is already a curmudgeon and dislikes Gen Z, this satire of the awful-yet-democracy-saving generation does not work. The jokes are a tad too obvious and too on the nose. The are trying to develop characters but it does not work well enough. I want a movie destroying Gen Z. Yet this film is not it. The film also suffers from a lighting problem. The power is suppose to be out (a classic for horror films) and there is a storm so no natural light from the moon and stars, yet then rooms frequently feature more-than-enough light to see characters. Or characters are hiding, with their cellphone flashlight on. Except if the room is dark, spotting that light is a no brainier. The premise was solid, but the execution in almost every possibly way did not work. So much so, despite having what should be a solid cast, I didn't feel the need to highlight any of their performances. [Independent Spirit – Best First Screenplay Nominee], *Paramount+*.

96. **Bros:** The film is 10–20 minutes too long (rom-coms in generally do not need to be two hours). The best parts are the jokes that land, and most of them do; I assume I missed a few of the in-jokes as well. Yet the issue the film tries too hard. Within the first scene, the viewer almost instantly

gets where the film is going (and frequently the film reminds the viewer that there are LGBT people beyond cis white gay men, despite the film being about cis white gay men; some of these moments are hilarious and others are not). But perhaps the biggest issue is that Billy Eichner (*Parks and Recreation*) is decent, but nothing special. And as Eichner is a co-writer, he ensures his character is not the bad guy in the relationship. As required in rom-coms they have a fight. The fight is from Luke Macfarlane's character (if being honest, John Cena would have brought more comedy to this role) telling Eichner's character to 'tone it down' when meeting his parents. If you believe that is a reasonable request (and Eichner's character not letting go that the mother does not teach her 2nd grade students about LGBT history in second grade), the film practically falls apart. Like the year *Love, Simon* came out, it is good that major studios are making these movies, but independent films have been doing it much better, for far longer. Go watch those. [GLAAD – Outstanding Wide Release Nominee], *Amazon Prime*.

95. **See How They Run:** The film has a 75% on Rotten Tomatoes because the film is 75% of what Wes Anderson would have made. Without the opening credits letting you know the director was Tom George, it'd be difficult to realize this wasn't a Wes Anderson film. It even has a few of Anderson's mainstays: Saoirse Ronan and Adrien Brody. Although the film is never bad, it simply is always reminding you that you could be watching something better: either a Wes Anderson film, or a good adaptation of an Agatha Christie novel. Ronan in particular is rather good. The script does contain a few funny moments as well. Though the film gets too meta at times for its own good. [BAFTA – Outstanding British Film Nominee], *HBOMax*.

94. **Sonic the Hedgehog 2:** A great example of how to make a fun film. Ben Schwartz is great again as Sonic. I don't think a single person could play the role better. Idris Elba as Knuckles is an amazing cast coup and Elba nearly steals the show with an excellent comedic-at-times performance. Jim Carrey is perhaps the only person to properly play Robotnik and does so perfectly. Natasha Rothwell (*The White Lotus*) is given a character with even more room to shine and she is hilarious. When a film knows it is fun, leans into the fun, you get a fun film. Who cares about plot holes, the franchise is fun and fresh. [Black Reel Awards – Outstanding Voice Performance Nominee], *Amazon Prime*.

93. **Mrs Harris Goes to Paris:** By (almost) all measures this film should rank far lower. The plot has what should be multiple face-palm/deus ex machina moments. The characters *as written* are often one-dimensional and get little development. Yet the cast imparts such charm that you can't help but falling in love. It is the (cheesy) feel-good film of the year. Lesley Manvile (*Phantom Thread*) absolutely carries the film as Mrs Harris. Isabelle Huppert (*Greta*) is too good to ignore (as always). Lucas Bravo (*Emily in Paris*) is still charming in Paris. Alba Baptista is stunning, and hopefully she is given more English-language roles and we can see how talented she can be. They combine to create an uplifting film that overcomes most of the obvious flaws. [Oscars – Best Costume Design Nominee], *Amazon Prime*.

92. **Fresh:** Led by solid performances by Daisy Edgar-Jones and Sebastian Stan (*Logan Lucky*) the film is fun horror-adjacent satire (if it had a few more scary sequences it would be greatly improved). However, the major flaw of the film is the run time. It has no business being nearly two hours. The film has a natural ending fifteen minutes before the actual end. Instead we get fifteen more minutes for two-ish mediocre jokes and social statements (a few more scenes throughout the film could have been trimmed to get the run time closer to 90 minutes). The script is heavy-handed, but first-time director Mimi Cave seems promising. Pawel Pogorzelski (*Hereditary* and *Midsommar*) is the cinematographer and really elevates the film. Multiple shots are far superior than a film of this genre deserved to be (operating room, passing out, getting food from the freezer, packing of boxes, etc all look great). [Critic's Choice – Best Streaming Movie Nominee], *Hulu*.

Tier 9: Hi, I'm Ryan Lee. And Welcome to This Tier

91. **Jackass Forever:** The film gets its own tier. It isn't a narrative feature. It isn't exactly a documentary either (in the traditional sense). The gang has some grey hair, and recruited some new talent to help out with some of the stunts. Yet, watching someone get hit in the balls is still funny. The franchise is funny as ever. Watching Johnny Knoxville transition to MC rather than participant reminds you that the gang had been doing the unthinkable to their bones for over 20 years. And 20 years later, it still great watching a bunch of friends hang out, prank each other and support each other. [*Jackass* Franchise], *Paramount+.*

Tier 8: The Okay Dramas, Horrors, and Better Fun Movies

90. **The Eternal Daughter:** I need someone to explain the appeal of Joanna Hogg. I have seen three of her movies, two are straight duds. At least this film benefits from Tilda Swinton being the lead, rather than a smaller supporting character. The dialogue is bland, the to say the pacing is glacial is disrespectful to the few remaining glaciers we have. There is a 'twist' that is seen miles away. The only character study going on here, is a study in the viewer's patience. At least, this time the film looks good and moody (Hogg's previous films have frequently suffered from grainy pictures; here the 16mm film looks better). As long as Hogg keep making bad films, that critics somehow love, I'll keep writing up bad reviews. [National Board of Review Top Ten Independent Film].

89. **Ali & Ava:** The film would rank higher if the sound was mixed properly. Multiple dialogue-driven scenes are almost inaudible. The poor sound makes it difficult to get into the film and is poor production. The film excels in its simplicity; a middle-aged Pakistani man meets and falls in love with a middle-aged British woman. Each of whom have lives that are filled in with details; providing a lot of character development. Though, most of the character development is as expected (dealing with racism being a tad obvious at times). Its fits nicely into the British Kitchen Sink genre. [BAFTA – Outstanding British Film Nominee], *Paramount+.*

88. **True Things:** Ruth Wilson (*Locke*) carries the film. She is rather good as a middle-aged worker who is bored with her life and find thrills with an ex-con. The issue with the film that after forty-or-so minutes the viewer realizes her new 'boyfriend' is only using her. That it is not love or a healthy physical-only relationship. The transition from fling to troublesome to realization takes too long. Although the final does work to rectify the situation, the middle simply is not there as film. There is only one sequence that shows why she is in this relationship; a first-date with another suitor who although seemingly interested in her, is not interested in her sexual advances. It is nice to see a film with a forty-year-old women with sexual desires; it is character not portrayed much. The character and Ruth Wilson's portrayal of the it, elevate the film enough to rank here. [British Independent Film – Best Actress Nominee], *Hulu.*

87. **God's Country:** The landscape shots are gorgeous. There is solid lighting for the indoor shots. The film starts of with little dialogue and lets the visuals combined with Thandiwe Newton's skill. Yet quickly, that ends up being all there is to the film. The plot has a solid core, but gets distracted by countless social statements (Hurricane Katrina, hiring practices, unwanted sexual advancements, police shooting, etc). There are so many statements, none of which are made subtly that the viewer gets the impression the screenwriter started throwing stuff against the wall to see what would stick. There was a good film to be made here, but this was not it. [American Society of Cinematographers – Spotlight Nominee].

86. **Weird: The Al Yankovic Story:** The parody biopic you didn't know you needed. It is easily one of the more fun films of the year (although frequently stupid/absurdest fun). There is little-to-no

heart to the film, but it does a solid job parodying biopics. Daniel Radcliffe (*Swiss Army Man*) is rather good as Weird Al, Evan Rachel Wood (*Kajillionaire*) is great as Madonna. There a tons of great cameos (most of which are in a *Boogie Nights* pool party scene). There are times it is easy to see Roku was strict about the 8 million dollar budget, but those are forgiven as the film is dumb fun. [PGA Awards – Best Streaming Movie Nominee], *Roku*.

85. **Chip 'n Dale: Rescue Rangers:** A movie that has little reason to exist, and it knows it has no reason to exist. There are multiple jokes about (unnecessary) reboots and sequels and the saturation of certain IP. Andy Samberg and John Mulaney are great as Dale and Chip. The rest of the voice cast is rather good, with some deep cuts (original voice actors reprising classic characters). There are multiple LA-specific jokes, which helps with my ranking. The combination of live action and multiple animation styles works. The film is often funny, and enjoyable. [Primetime Emmy – Best TV Movie Winner], *Disney+*.

84. **Honor Society:** The second feminist fourth-wall-breaking film on the list! Angourie Rice (*Jasper Jones* and *Ladies in Black*) was finally given a leading role (albeit in a teenage coming-of-age comedy/drama) and crushed it (as expected to those following her non-*Spider-Man* work). Rice brings the proper amount of wit and charm to role. The script brings enough new items to the college-application genre, even if it falls into a few tropes at times. The film spent most of the budget on hiring three actors: Rice, Gaten Matarazzo (*Stranger Things*), and Christopher Mintz-Plasse (*Superbad*), all of whom are perfectly cast in their roles. Yet the remaining student actors are nothing special; though a few of them did show some signs of talent. The jokes often land, and it makes for an enjoyable and new-ish take on senior year. [WGA Awards – Best TV & New Media Screenplay], *Paramount+*.

83. **It Is In Us All:** The film has a lot it wants to say about grief, hometowns, and even sexuality. Yet, too much is kept hidden. The film needed to make multiple character motivations more concrete; too much is left the viewer's imagination. Because the film lacks detailed plot points, it drags even at 90 minutes. It also doesn't help that the sound mixing was rather bad (and no it isn't the Irish accents that make it hard to hear the dialogue, it is the poor sound). There are multiple nice visuals and framed shots. But it is one you wish was better and something was there, yet that something was kept too under-wraps. [British Independent Film – Best Lead Performance Nominee].

82. **Men:** Alex Garland (*Ex Machina* and *Annihilation*) is a master of camera placement and movement. In a plot lacking much tension, the camerawork carries a heavy load (and does so rather well—at first). Jessie Buckley (*Beast*, *Wild Rose*, and *The Lost Daughter*) is a great actress and in line for an Oscar one day soon. She carries a heavy load (and does so rather well—at first). Yet despite the camera work and acting skill, the final third falls flat. It isn't exactly scary. The film is overly clear about certain implications and tries to be about far too much (few of which land with the impact you'd hope). The climax drags out. The film starts off with some potential (though it feels slow only a few minutes in) and then crumbles under its own weight. [British Independent Film – Best Cinematography Nominee].

81. **Mad God:** Easily the most out-there film of the year (and could easily rank a tier higher, or lower). The film is mainly (grotesque) stop-motion without any dialogue. Or semblance of a plot. Eventually the 'plot' becomes more 'clear' as a *2001* homage regarding the life-cycle of the universe (universes?; the movie it out there). The character and the sets are so well done it is difficult to knock the film. It also helps that the runtime is 80 minutes; even if the film drags (again, there is no plot) it is quickly over. And when it is over, you'll ask yourself what the hell did you just watch? It looks amazing, it is certainly the most unique film of the year, and I'm glad it was made. But it is too out there to rank any higher. [Annie Awards – Outstanding Achievement for Production Design Nominee].

80. **Barbarian:** The film adds some new items to the #MeToo horror, but there are other films (from this year) that do it better. It is a film to know as little as possible going in (some of the other themes that emerge, and again other films from this year do them better). Perhaps the biggest complaint is that the main character suffers from Dumb-Horror-Character Syndrome. They make far too many bad/illogical decisions (all of which then progress the plot). Some of the decisions could have been explained with a little more character development at the beginning of the film. [Critic's Choice Super Awards – Best Horror Movie Nominee], *HBOMax*.

79. **The Swimmers:** An emotional film about two real-life Syrian Swimming Sisters, who flee Syria to Germany. The film does feature multiple scenes in Arabic, especially in the beginning. The film carries a lot of emotional weight, as to be expected given the subject matter, but it also manages to frequently keep the film uplifting and light-hearted (at times). The casting director deserves a raise for finding real-life sisters Nathalie and Manal Issa to play the leads. Nathalie is a delight and hopefully gets more work in the future. Matthias Schweigh ofer (*Army of Thieves* is enjoyable in a supporting role. Some scenes could probably be cut to save time. There are better movies about the European refugee crisis (*His House* being the best), but none are as uplifting as this one. [BAFTA – Outstanding British Film Nominee], *Netflix*.

78. **Watcher:** A movie you've seen a million times (and a few times this year!). A woman in Europe with her husband swears a neighbor is watching her. There is absolutely nothing new. However, Maika Monroe (*It Follows*) reminds us that she is a talented actress. She and the directing of Chloe Okuno help keep the tension high enough. It also helps the film is a tight 96 minutes (a sin other horror films this year had against it). The film balances Monroe's character potentially going crazy and her being correct rather well. I would have preferred a more ambiguous ending, but even that change would not result in the film ranking much higher. [Well-reviewed Horror], *Hulu*.

77. **Do Revenge:** A rather difficult film to rank as its variance is rather high—the bad parts are bad, and the good parts are extremely enjoyable. Firstly, the film is far too long (almost two hours). The opening sequence is unfunny and practically all of the jokes fail to land. Jokes failing to land continues throughout the entire film. Jennifer Kaytin Robinson wrote and directed, and her writing credits also include *Thor: Love and Thunder* and *Unpregnant*. In too many places the film is not funny, and for a comedy, that is a problem. Also Camila Mendes is not up to be the co-lead (especially when partnered with Maya Hawke). Maya Hawke steals the show. She is amazing (one has to wonder if she was cast before fully breaking out; the leads are that mis-matched). Talia Ryder (*Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Always*) has a small supporting role you wished was expanded more as she is that good. The costumes are amazing, and will be a perfect example of how contemporary costumes are overlooked come awards season. With a tighter and funnier script this could have been *Mean Girls* for a new generation, but it never approaches that lofty status. [GLAAD – Outstanding Streaming Film Nominee], *Netflix*.

76. **The Drover's Wife: The Legend of Molly Johnson:** The film has some lovely shots of the Australian wilderness. Writer-director-actor Leah Purcell does a decent job all around, though her script could have used some tightening. There are too many characters, with too many themes (most of which are heavy-handed). Dialing the film in and toning down the obvious injustices would have improved the film. Yet, the other aspects are nice enough that you don't mind most of the issues. [AACTA – Best Film Nominee], *Hulu*.

75. **Armageddon Time:** A semi-autobiographical film written and directed by James Gray (*Ad Astra*). The film handles the issues of both Black and Jewish oppression well, but is often predictable (the Jewish, and white, family is able to assimilate easier and pass as regular white people; reaping all of the benefits of said whiteness). Both Anne Hathaway and Anthony Hopkins are rather good. Jeremy Irons was decent, but his character needed more fleshing out. The film proceeds exactly how you

think it will, and says exactly what you think it will. You can't help wish it was better, but there also aren't many glaring flaws. [National Board of Review - Top Ten Independent Film], *Peacock*.

Tier 7: The Good-Enough Dramas, Horrors, and Best Fun Movies

74. **Three Months:** Troye Sivan (*Boy Erased*) is rather good in the lead role of a potentially HIV-positive teen. The supporting cast is full of knock outs: Judy Greer, Louis Gossett Jr. (*Watchmen*, tv series), and Ellen Burstyn (*The Last Picture Show* and *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*). Burstyn in particular has an excellent scene. The primary issue with the film is that it settles into the standard tropes of the coming-of-age and last-summer-before-college genres. These aren't a bad thing, but you wish the film did more with its unique premise. [Critic's Choice Awards – Best Streaming Movie Nominee], *Paramount+*.

73. **Pompo: The Cinephile:** It's Anime *The Fabelmans*! It is a nice tribute to our love of movies, though at times it is heavy-handed about why we love movies. It does an excellent job of showing the various aspects of filmmaking; editing, financing, the happy accidents, etc. That B-movies can be fun, and so can three-hour art films (again it is heavy-handed at times). The animation has multiple styles and is generally nice (the film depicts the editing/cutting process as a Shonen/superhero style with him wielding a giant blade). The film does sputter in the middle and drags, despite being 90 minutes. Better pacing and the film would rank higher. [Annie Awards – Best Independent Film Nominee].

72. **Kimi:** The anti-tech themes are front-and-center. It is obviously made during Covid (for better-or-worse); though seeing characters wear masks outdoors and be obsessive about hand sanitizer shows how much we were mislead by public health officials. Also, it should be pointed out that tech was one of the big items that helped us during the pandemic (virtual meetings, ordering items online, etc). There is also a scene where people protesting against clearing out a homeless encampment holding signs reading, 'Housing is Human Right' help save he main character. Except, as a general rule, anyone who says, 'Housing is a Human Right' is actually against building new housing. Political issues aside, the film is decent, if predictable. It is an enjoyable 90 minutes. Some of the effects when the main character ventures outside go from cool to annoying as they keep going (the frame-rate was stuttered with dutch angles). Zo e Kravitz is good, not great. [Steven Soderbergh], *HBOMax*.

71. **Fire Island:** Written and starring Joel Kim Baker as a modernization of *Pride and Prejudice*. The film has a lot of good jokes. However, the voice-overs get annoying and the script is often too on-the-nose. Most of the cast is rather good (though I am not as high on Baker as most; my favorite cast member was Conrad Ricamora). The film excels as a heart-felt gay film. More LGBT updates of classic literature would be a welcome addition. [Independent Spirit – Best First Screenplay Nominee], *Hulu*.

70. **The Bad Guys:** A fun animated film. The film is from original source material, but feels a lot like *Zootopia* (both were developed around the same time; safe to say they were created independently). The similarity to *Zootopia* hurt the film as *Zootopia* was on the screen first. Yet the story of being profiled, social forces leading 'bad' guys into crime, and the need for redemption and leniency all still work rather well. The animation itself is rather good, and I personally loved the recreation of Los Angeles as the location (it is never explicitly said, but the city is LA to a T). The script is solid, enough jokes to carry to film. The voice cast is good as well, but not much to highlight as outstanding, perhaps Richard Ayoade (*The IT Crowd*) and Zazie Beetz (*Nine Days*) are the two best. [Eddie Awards – Best Edited Animated Film Nominee], *Netflix*.

69. **Drifting Home:** The film needed to be 15–20 minutes shorter, and then it could rank a fair bit higher. As the film has an emotional climax, and then it repeats the same emotional high a few more

times. Once the viewer discovers the exact nature of the how the characters relate to each other, the film pulls off its primary objective. Yet, the repetition becomes a chore. It is fairly standard for the is-it-all-a-dream coming-of-age film, but adds the nice layer of two characters dealing with grief in opposite ways: i) refusing to move on and ii) forgetting it ever happened. Neither way is healthy. [Netflix Anime], *Netflix*.

68. **Fortune Favors Lady Nikuko:** The film starts off slow, and many of the initial jokes are puns that do not translate well from Japanese to English. The animation isn't anything special. The first few plot points are standards of the coming-of-age middle school genre; early crush, initial spats with friends, awkward mother etc. Yet the film finds a way to bring it all together. Going into more detail risks spoilers, but the ending is rather moving; making up for a lot of the shortcomings. [Well-reviewed Anime].

67. **Catch the Fair One:** A revenge thriller who's best parts are the thrills and the social commentary on missing native women. Although the sheer number of missing native women is large, and these people are often forgotten by society, the film has little to offer beyond that general theme. The film attempts to develop some character for the lead, but it doesn't go as far as similar films. There is nothing bad with the film, yet it also doesn't have much that helps it stands out (beyond the brief social commentary that could have been expanded on). [Independent Spirit – Best Female Lead Nominee], *Hulu*.

66. **Funny Pages:** A funny-enough coming-of-age film. A fair bit of the comedy comes from absurdist humor, though the film bounces back-and-forth between absurdest humor to drama making some of the jokes not land. I also believe those that enough comics might enjoy the film more; perhaps some of the deeper cuts/appreciation of the genre were lost on me. What helps the film is that it takes an interesting approach on the coming-of-age with a teenager who is desperate for approval and latches onto (potentially bad) mentors. Matthew Maher is rather good in a supporting role. It will be interesting what writer-director Owen Kline does next after his debut. [National Board of Review – Top Ten Independent Film].

65. **She Will:** The visuals of the film are the best part set the mood for the film. The issue is the film spoils its ending rather quickly (though the journey is enjoyable). Although there is some mystery, it is rarely spooky (would not exact describe it as a horror). Alice Krige does enough solid acting to keep the film afloat (though not exactly carrying as the film could still be passable with a different lead). It stills ends up being a rather standard feminist film. For Charlotte Colbert's directorial debut it was solid, and if she can maintain the visual quality with an improved story her second film will easily be worth checking out. [British Independent Film – Breakthrough Producer Nominee], *Hulu*.

64. **Resurrection:** Rebecca Hall (*The Night House*, *Christine*) and Tim Roth (*Chronic*, *Luce*) steal the show. Hall is especially good and deserved more attention for her performance. In the middle of the film there is a lengthy uncut monologue. That scene is excellent. Yet it appears too late to have hooked the viewer, and too early that the rest of the film feels like a relative let down. However, the largest issue with the film is the script from writer-director Andrew Semans. The script wants to keep items mysterious, but it veers too far into left field. The ending is a let down. If the film had a better understanding about what it wanted to say about toxic relationships and abuse, the progression of the film would have been better. As initially it does a good job of maintaining ambiguity, but it falls apart during the final scenes. [Critic's Choice Super Awards – Best Actress in a Horror Nominee].

63. **The Menu:** The film is a dark comedy, the horror aspect of the advertising was misleading. The cast was good, not great. None one really deserved any acting nominations. The story is good, but the script is too obvious. Intelligent viewers will always be a few steps ahead, and it makes sure you know what it is going on at all times (some more mystery would have been better). Yet the collection

of talent is undeniable, and it basically works. It veers too much into mass entertainment instead of an interesting satire of the foodies and food culture. [Eddie Awards – Best Edited Comedy Film Nominee], *HBOMax*.

62. **The Stranger:** One of my mild pet peeves is films where the main characters look the same. Sean Harris (*Trespass Against Us*) looks like an older, tweaker version of Joel Edgerton's character (the film also leans into the similarities). The film is impeccably shot and the sound is amazing (especially a scene after bugging a vehicle, the dialogue is as-if heard on the recording). It does take a little while to get going, and there is rarely any mystery. There also could have been deeper character development, but there was still a fair bit. It is an newer take on the criminal investigation genre. [AACTA – Best Screenplay Winner], *Netflix*.

61. **Thirteen Lives:** A telling of the boys soccer team stuck in a Thailand cave. The film is a tad long (two hours and thirty minutes; and even at the end they almost certainly edited around a pipe bursting to trim the runtime). The first hours is a slog—procedural without giving the view much information on the specifics. The film has almost no character development or even themes (it could have hit on government failure, but only hinted at it), instead the only these that really pops up is religion. The English cast is good, even if given little to work with. The last hour works, primarily because of how daunting the rescue was in real-life. The underwater shots are nice, and Ron Howard is a solid director. Yet it leaves the viewer wishing more depth was added to the event. [Black Reel Awards – Outstanding Editing Nominee], *Amazon Prime*.

60. **Puss in Boots: The Last Wish:** For a film that had not reason to exist, it far surpassed expectations. Most of the animation is wonderful, though the shift in style during the action sequences detracted a bit. What really elevates the film is the voice cast. Banderas and Hayek are still good, but it is the additions of Harvey Guillén (*Werewolves Within*), Florence Pugh (*Black Widow*), Oliva Coleman (*The Lobster*), and John Mulaney (*Horse Loose in a Hospital*) that make this film rank where it does. An inferior voice cast moves this down a bunch. Easily the best collection of talent this year. The script starts of decently, but quickly becomes a routine and predictable. [Oscars – Best Animated Film Nominee], *Peacock*.

59. **Violent Night:** The film gives you everything you want from a movie about Santa killing a bunch of people, and more. A lot of the kills are innovative and awesome. It is also an honest-to-god Christmas movie. There is enough character development – especially the depth given to Santa – to carry the film thru any lulls. It strikes the perfect balance between absurd and emotional; it simply isn't a kill-the-bad-guys action movie. Have a few drink, sit back, and enjoy Santa wreck some dudes up. [Well-reviewed Action Movie], *Peacock*.

Tier 6: Smaller Films that Accomplished Their Goals, and Big-Budgets that Needed More

58. **Devotion:** The films suffers from not being *Top Gun: Maverick*. It is about naval aviators during the Korean War. Although some of the same people involved with *Top Gun* were brought on, the film isn't as good so the viewer spends the entire time wishing they were watching *Top Gun*. The film benefits from Jonathan Majors (*The Last Black Man in San Francisco*) and Glen Powell (*Hidden Figures*) chemistry and talent. Although the film is about the first Black aviator, it successfully avoids most pitfalls of first-black-person-to-do-something genre, even when it does learn into that genre, it adds enough depth to be overly routine. J.D. Dillard (*Sweetheart*) does an admirable job directing. Even if semi-standard biopic, it is fun, with solid acting. [Black Reel Awards – Outstanding Film Nominee], *Paramount+*.

57. **On the Count of Three:** Jerrod Carmichael stars and directs, and is good at both. He and Christopher Abbott (*James White*) carry the film with their performances and chemistry. The film is rounded out with excellent actors in small supporting roles (Tiffany Haddish, J.B. Smoove, Lavell Crawford, and Henry Winkler). The film is about mental health; depression and suicidal thoughts. It handles the weighty topics with a nice touch of humor. Easily the most laughs you'll have in a film about suicide. Though the film does fall into a few common traps and the plot feels episodic at times. Yet, because the leads work well together and there are enough laughs, any flaws can be ignored. [Sundance – Waldo Salt Screenwriting Award Winner], *Hulu.*

56. **Emily the Criminal:** The film ventures into (older) Millennial grievances too often. Although none of the individual grievances is beaten to death, it is the accumulation of them all (student debt, independent contractor, unpaid intern, etc) that does the viewer in. There are too many social issues the film wants to touch on, and although they are coherently put together the viewer gets tired of them. Aubrey Plaza (*Black Bear*) is good (not great) and has been churning out solid performances for a while now. It is a taught 90 minute crime thriller, and if the social commentary does it for you, it can easily rank higher. [Independent Spirit – Best First Screenplay Winner], *Netflix.*

55. **The Batman:** A perfect midwit litmus test film. Anyone gushing over it, is a midwit. It is still a decent film, but it is nothing special. If you want a gritty crime thriller *Se7en* did it better. If you want well-shot action sequences *Tenet* was better. The fight scenes are an average *John Wick* clone. The plot is uninterested in character development. Robert Pattinson(*High Life* and *The Rover*) and Paul Dano (*The Girl Next Door* and *Love & Mercy*) are both good, and add a lot to their characters that the screenwriters could not be bothered with developing. There are some rather good (not great shots), but they are quickly ruined by cuts. It seems the film was hurt by the requirements of a blockbuster superhero film. The film needs to be accessible to as many people as possible (the crime mystery is not that mysterious, the violence is PG-13, the 'romance' is PG-13, the criminal underground is PG-13). Again it is a midwit litmus test. The best part of the film is the score and it helps elevate the film in parts. Whereas the early voice-overs do not. [Oscars – Best Sound Nominee], *HBOMax.*

54. **Crimes of the Future:** The film is pure Cronenberg. There is a fair bit of body horror (that is also sexy?). Léa Seydoux (*Inglourious Basterds*) and Kristen Stewart are both rather good. Viggo Mortensen is solid, though might overdo it at times. The various practical effects are good as would be expected from Cronenberg. The plot is slow at times and doesn't quite nail its themes. The film excels when it makes the body horror out to be sexy ('surgery is the new sex'). [Cronenberg], *Hulu.*

53. **Living:** The film is nearly impossible to rank as it is a remake of Kurosawa's 1952 near-masterpiece *Ikiru.* The source film does have a few flaws – mainly its run time – that the remake successfully cuts down on. Yet too much of the film lifts the exact plot points and even dialogue directly from the original (and it keeps the bad wipe cuts!). That the film was nominated for Best Screenplay at the Oscars is a near crime (perhaps to honor screenwriter Kazuo Ishiguro who does have a Nobel Prize in Literature?). Bill Nighy (*The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*) is good and it is nice to see him get some more serious recognition. Yet he is inferior to Takashi Shimura. Though Aimee Lou Wood is able to improve upon the young assistant role, and the costumes/sets are nice. Go watch *Ikiru.* [Oscars – Best Actor Nominee].

52. **Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery:** The film pales in comparison to the first. Whereas the first starts off as a murder mystery and then the viewer realizes the film is social commentary, this film makes its social commentary front and center (and that commentary isn't even that good). The middle third is frequently redundant and bloats the runtime (two hours and twenty minutes). Daniel Craig is still perfect in this role, and hopefully the next installment makes more use of Hugh Grant. The cast for this film was inferior to the first (sans Janelle Monáe); as the script was not interested

in much character development. I'll happily watch the next film, but the franchise is quickly at risk of getting stale. At least it was better than the other murder mystery films on the list (*Nile* and *See How They Run*). [Oscars – Best Adapted Screenplay Nominee], *Netflix*.

51. **Catherine Called Birdy:** Adapted from a novel, the film has many similarities to both *Enola Holmes* and *Rosaline*. Yet, Bella Ramsey was not as good as the leads in them. She was good, but not great. This film adapts the novel nicely (haven't read it, but there are cinematic flourishes that help in taking character descriptions from the novel). The films almost falls apart in the final thirty minutes as characters experience sudden changes. All throughout it keeps a feminist approach to the coming-of-age (medieval) story. Also, Russell Brand steals the single scene is he in. [Independent Spirit – Best Screenplay Nominee], *Amazon Prime*.

50. **Hellbender:** A horror film that is shot on a shoestring budget (though it helps when the main characters are played by real-life mother and daughter (Toby Poser and Zelda Adams), who co-wrote and co-directed along with their husband/dad, and the other daughter is in the film as well). There are multiple gorgeous shots with both framing, lighting, and shadows. The editing is rather good as well (cuts from dream sequences to reality are great). There is enough plot and character development (it is a dark coming-of-age film) to keep the film going. One wishes the film had a little more in the scare department, and even a little more in the ambiguity department. It still is unique, well-shot, and I look forward to what the family makes next (hopefully someone gives them more of a budget). [Well-reviewed Horror].

49. **Smile:** One of the scarier movies of the year. The frights (only some of which are jump scares) are the main reason it ranks here. Sadly the plot is essentially *It Follows* and the viewer quickly recognizes the similarities (and therefore wishes they were watching *It Follows*). The visuals and sound are decent (again, it produces honest scares); the budget was 17mil compared to *It Follows*' 1 million. Rob Morgan (*Bull*) only has one scene, and he absolutely steals it, as you'd expect. He is putting together a great little career. At two hours it drags a bit (and uses the extra run time to really spell out to the viewer the situation and stakes), cutting it down would have improved the film a bit. I can't wait to see what debut writer-director Parker Finn does next (assuming it is more original). [Critic's Choice Super Awards – Best Horror Movie Nominee], *Amazon Prime* and *Paramount+*.

48. **Nanny:** Although partially listed as a horror film, it is more of a drama with some suspense elements. Going into it expecting a full-blown horror can end poorly as the film wont meet those expectations. There is a strong argument the film should have expanded on the horror aspects of the film (leaned into its cross between *Get Out* and *His House*). The (rich and white) supporting characters could have been rounded out more, though they have some depth. The film ends up begin a solid look into immigrant life; the better opportunities in America and the life left behind. It also works as an analysis of (good) parenting. [National Board of Review – Top Ten Independent Film], *Amazon Prime*.

47. **7 Days:** The film is held together by both Karan Soni (*Deadpool*) and Geraldine Viswanathan (*Blockers*, *The Broken Hearts Gallery*). Both are funny and add a lot comedy to a film that is sadly short on jokes (a rom-com should have more laughs than this one contains). Being shot over the course of eight days in Summer 2020, about March 2020, the film does suffer from a lot of (poor) Covid knowledge at that time (a general theme of this list is the films made early in Covid, about Covid, are inferior to ones made with the knowledge of some hindsight). As for example, (and mild spoiler), she gets Covid the day after she went outside (and made a point of mentioning all the things *she touched*). As the title implies, the film moves too quickly, but it is sweet with good performances. It is a decent first film by writer-direct Roshan Sethi. [Independent Spirit – Best First Feature Winner], *Hulu*.

46. **Causeway:** A film that has been done before; two misfits bond over their shared trauma. Yet when those misfits are played Jennifer Lawrence and Brian Tyree Henry you are bound to end up with a good movie. Every scene with the two of them is enjoyable. Stephen McKinley Henderson is also solid in a supporting role. The film also doesn't try too much—it is only 94 minutes. Trying to pad the runtime would have turned the film into a chore. [Oscars – Best Supporting Actor Nominee], *AppleTV+*.

45. **Hustle:** By most accounts the film should not be this high. I even tried to adjust for my love of basketball in the ranking. Yet, despite the predictable plot (though it is not overly cliché and avoids major plots holes) Adam Sandler (*Uncut Gems*) carries the film. When Sandler wants to act, he can. Sandler is very good in this film (it helps that in real life he randomly shows up to NYC courts and plays pick-up ball), as Sandler portrays the dedication to the grind perfectly. His character is given enough depth to garner an emotional investment. The cinematography and editing (during the montages) helps to separate the film from others in the long-shot sports genre. [SAG Awards – Best Actor Nominee], *Netflix*.

44. **Breaking:** John Boyega (*Detroit*) carries the film and deserve more recognition for his work. Micheal K Williams (*The Wire*) is also rather good in a supporting role. The film attempts to deal with a few too many themes, which are often a tad heavy-handed. The complexity of the VA could have been explored more. The film contains a few good edits (using the news helicopter sound to cut to Afghanistan being the best). And perhaps worst of all, the ending does feel rushed (and yet after the ending, the film still continues on for a few unnecessary minutes). [Black Reel Awards – Best Actor Nominee], *Paramount+*.

43. **Good Luck to You, Leo Grande:** Directed by Sophie Hyde (*52 Tuesdays*), the works because of Emma Thompson (*Love Actually*) and Daryl McCormack (*A Good Woman is Hard to Find*). Those two elevate the film (the film is their two character in a hotel room, multiple times). The script is too on-the-nose multiple times, but both actors impart more emotional depth that isn't in the script allowing the film to succeed. One wishes their were more directorial or editorial flourishes, as the film does feel like a two-man play. Yet what remains is a lovely little film on sexuality, lost dreams, and parenting. [British Independent Film – Best Director Nominee], *Hulu*.

42. **Prey:** First a disclaimer: I have not seen a single *Predator* movie. I do not know what was a call back and what was new to this film. I assume The Mouse^{TM} didn't know what they had with this film. Some of the VFX are bad and look cheap. The deer in the beginning looked awful (as do most of the 'animals'). Yet, the film does make good use of its scenery (some of the scenes at night could have been better in terms of visuals). The film excels because the character develop and plot. Good writing is the reason this film can rank here. Although the film does not excel or get deeply into its themes (compared to the higher-ranking films) it does the proper level for mass entertainment. Amber Midthunder is good as the lead, and should be offered more roles thanks to her break out here. It is a perfect example of what quality mass entertainment films can be. [PGA Awards – Best Streaming Movie Nominee], *Hulu*.

41. **Glorious:** A delightful little horror-comedy. JK Simmons does excellent voice work as the demigod stuck inside rest-stop bathroom stall (the film's premise is bonkers). Ryan Kwanten is able to keep up enough with Simmons as the heart-broken man stuck in the bathroom with the demigod. Most of the film is simply Kwanten's character talking with the unseen-but-behind-the-gloryhole demigod. I generally love these types of lower-budget bare-bones tiny-cast films, especially when the premise is mildly absurd and the film leans into the absurdity. [Well-reviewed Horror].

40. **The Black Phone:** A delightful little film that is more thriller than horror (if you go in expecting scares you'll be disappointed—there are only a few jump scares). Ethan Hawke (*First Reformed*, *Boyhood*, *Sunrise* trilogy) is amazing as always. His portrayal of the villain is peachy-keen. Though

one wishes his character was given a bit more background. The same goes for the abusive father (played by Jeremy Davies). Not that an abusive father can be redeemed, but there was potential to deepen his character that was not explored. The various child actors are good, particularly the sister played by Madeleine McGraw. The film is guided by symbolism that once the viewer figures out (rather quickly) some of the mystery is gone. However said symbolism is appreciated and adds a nice layer to the film. [Critic's Choice Super Awards – Best Horror Movie Nominee], *Amazon Prime.*

39. **Pinocchio (Guillermo del Toro):** The animation is absolutely amazing. The animation alone probably should have this rank higher. The voice acting was good, particularly Christoph Waltz. I found Gregory Mann (the voice of Pinocchio) to be grating. I feel safe in saying, part of my ranking is simply to finding his voice annoying. To make matters worse, Pinocchio sings! (also, there is little-to-no reason for songs. They are a reminder you are not listening to the ones in the OG animation). While we are here, it is worth pointing out that del Toro is in overrated territory (not bad, only overrated). [Oscars – Best Animated Film Winner], *Netflix.*

38. **Bruiser:** A nice coming-of-age character drama. Trevante Rhodes (*Moonlight*) is rather good, and so is Shamier Anderson (*Stowaway*) as the competing father figures. Each representing a different view on life, masculinity, and parenting. In many ways, the story has been done before; the introduction of the 'cool' new father figure into a boy's life. Yet, the characters are complex and give what could have been a simplistic film, a lot of depth. This is Miles Warren's directorial debut and is worth watching going forward. The film is about a Black family, and although race is obviously front-and-center, the film rarely confronts it. The film allows the viewer to pick up the deeper meaning in the parenting styles. There is never the you-need-to-work-twice-as-hard speech, rather father figures fighting to get him an education or to teaching the boy to defend himself from the harsh world he'll be entering. [Independent Spirit - Best Supporting Performance Nominee], *Hulu.*

37. **Nope:** Jordan Poole is a master of the camera, but his writing is slipping. *Nope* is easily his worst film. The characters are lacking in characterization. Daniel Kaluuya is good as always, even if he was given little to work with. Keke Palmer either overacts or was given a poorly written character. Steven Yeun is solid in a supporting role. The other main issue is the film takes too many themes and as a result can't flush out any of them. If I tried to list them, we'd be here all day. There are that many. Now, Poole creates multiple amazing shots. The quality puts the film here. The blood scene is beautiful. The entirety of *Gordy's Home* looks amazing. Yet after all the beautiful shots and VFX, the film simply exists. [AFI Top Ten], *Amazon Prime.*

Tier 5: Good Movies You Should Watch

36. **Wildhood:** The film takes a lot of standard tropes and combines them nicely: the buddy (lovers) road trip movie and the runaway searching the other parent being the two most prominent. Yet, it layers the film with Indigenous and gay characters giving it a lot more depth than most in these crowded genres. The film excels at showing and not telling, though the film does bog down slightly (never gets to be a bore). It also gets to be a little episodic as well, though that is always an issue with the road trip genre. Michael Greyeyes (*Wild Indian*) is great in a supporting role and has probably cemented himself as the best Indigenous actor. [GLAAD – Outstanding Streaming Film Nominee], *Hulu.*

35. **The Wonder:** Co-written by Emma Donoghue (*Room*) and directed by Sebastián Lelio (*Disobedience*) with Florence Pugh in the leading role, the film should have been better. The primary issue is the viewer figures it out about five-to-ten minutes too soon multiple times. A tighter script would have avoided this issue (the plot is rather good, with excellent characters; also the script features many well-designed callbacks). The English/Irish countryside remains undefeated for a scenic place to set a film. The sets are rather good (the film makes a point of showing the viewer that these are

sets). The cinematography and camerawork is rather good. The ending allows for multiple interpretations (in part because of the opening sequence). But a few minor fixes could have really elevated the film. [British Independent Film – Best Director Nominee], *Netflix*.

34. **The Sea Beast:** An excellently animated film about far more than hunting sea beasts. The animation is some of the best of the year. Directed by Chris Williams (*Big Hero 6* and *Moana*), even though it is a Netflix film, it belongs among his previous efforts for Disney. One smart move was the animation for the main sea beast is semi-cheap; Red is—red. But this saving allowed for detailed animation on the other sea beasts who appear for a few minutes. They look gooood. There are some great shots involving water as well. At first the film follows the standard orphan coming-of-age trope seen in countess animated film, yet as the film progresses, the viewer realizes it has a lot more intellectual depth and a is a deeply seriously movie about important topics. [Oscars – Best Animated Film nominee], *Netflix*.

33. **Belle:** The film finally got its US release in 2022, so it on this list. We live in a society with rules! The animation is good, though some of the computer animation looks obviously computer generated. The switching from the 'real-world' and 'The U' allows for multiple animation styles. The film bites off more than it can chew at times, but with the bonus that it does not follow the plot the viewer expects. There are also a few too many supporting characters because of the sprawling plot. Yet the plot still manages to move the viewer with its messages on inner beauty/strength and overcoming fears. [Annie Awards – Best Independent Film Nominee], *HBOMax*.

32. **A Love Song:** A lovely little film on loss, love, longing, and regret. The film location is perfect; the beauty of the lake-side campsite under a lone mountain peak is unmistakable. It lends itself to multiple amazing shots. Dale Dickey (*Winter's Bone*, *Leave No Trace*) carries the film, and Wes Studi is also rather good. The film is slow at times; debut director Max Walker-Silverman lets the camera linger, with minimal dialogue. The film is focused on what it wants to say; there are minimal supporting characters—and they all exist to advance the plot and the few (but powerful) themes of the film. [National Board of Review – Top Ten Independent Film], *Paramount+*.

31. **Bones and All:** Yes the film is about cannibals, but it is not gruesome (perhaps I've watched a few too many horror films, and come to terms with what I know I would do on a deserted island with other people). Once any shock factor wears off there is a lovely romance/coming-of-age road-trip movie (*American Honey* being the most recent comparison). Taylor Russell (*Waves*) is rather good. Timothée Chalamet is good as always. Mark Rylance nearly steals the shows (and had he not won an Oscar, I imagine there would have been a massive campaign for him). Getting past the flesh, blood, and tendons is a tender lover story about two people trying to find their place in the world. [Independent Spirit – Best Feature Nominee].

30. **The House:** A stop-motion anthology film (some places have it listed as a tv series, but it became a three-part anthology; even Netflix presents all three as one movie). The animation quality is top-notch. It might be the best in terms of animation quality (even better than *Pinocchio*). The anthology leaves a lot open for interpretation, and perhaps could have connected the parts a little more; there are a lot of potential interpretations. The first segment borders on horror (it is not exactly scary, but eerie), while the second segment is more grotesque at times. There is even a Busby (or should I say Bugsby) Berkeley tribute song-and-dance number. [Annie Awards – Best Animated Special Production Nominee], *Netflix*.

29. **The Outfit:** Held together by a solid script (shockingly did not get much recognition) and the wonderful-as-always Mark Rylance and Zoey Deutch. Johnny Flynn (*The Dig*, *Emma.*, and *Beast*) is rather good in a supporting role. The film is well shot (entirely within a 1950s Chicago haberdashery), and keeps up the suspense. Perhaps as an economist, I overly enjoy the script as characters deftly use new predicaments to incentivize the others to go along with the new version of events. The lies

(and bodies) keep piling up. One of the more overlooked films, especially given it was made on a 5 million dollar budget. This should have been a profit-making machine. [British Independent Film – Best Supporting Performance Nominee], *Amazon Prime.*

28. **What Josiah Saw:** Although the film is often listed as a psychological horror, it is more of a slow-burn thriller. It is rarely scary for those going into hoping for horror. And it is very much a slow burn. At two hours long, the viewer needs to stay in the film until final twenty minutes. Thankfully the film is broken up into three distinct sections (helping with the length). Yet, the minor details in each section come back to matter at the end. Sadly, going into more detail means spoilers and forcing my interpretation on you (this is a film that pulls off an ambiguous ending; a crime against film-making I generally point out and heavily discount when done incorrectly). [Well-reviewed Horror].

27. **Emergency:** A lovely twist on the college party film. Two black students about to set out on a night of epic partying come home from class to find a white girl passed out drunk on their floor. Put in a no-win situation, they and their Latino roommate must decide to help this girl, without jeopardizing their own safety. Naturally one of the students knows not to trust the police while the other Princeton-PhD-bound students believes they have nothing to worry about. The film generally proceeds how you'd expect, but almost all of the situations are explained and make sense. The film is also filled with multiple great jokes (partially due to the chemistry between RJ Cyler *Me, Earl, and the Dying Girl* and Donald Elise Watkins). Sabrina Carpenter (*The Hate U Give*) has a supporting role, and once again has no problem playing the 'evil' character. At a few points the social commentary gets heavy-handed, but even then those can be overlooked due to the comedy in those situations. [Independent Spirit – Best First Screenplay Nominee], *Amazon Prime.*

26. **The Cathedral:** This low-budget coming-of-age drama could easily rank higher. The film takes many risks; a voice-over explaining relationships (gives off the feel of an all-knowing narrator in a novel), long shots of nothing (post cards, a slice of birthday cake, and a opening scene of a hand), and these risks generally pay off. The film is hard to follow; lots of names of adults, with increasingly complicated relationships. The sets and costumes are amazing as they perfectly capture the late-80s to the early-00s. The easiest film to compare to is *Boyhood*, though in this case the adults are played by the same actors, but multiple actors play the child. The child who the film is not exactly about, but rather those family relations in the background of growing up. It is an interesting and fresh take on coming-of-age; all of the events missed as a child. It is Ricky D'Ambrose's second feature film, and I can't wait to see what he does next. [Independent Spirit – John Cassavetes Winner].

25. **The Fallout:** More school shooting films are starting to be made. This one is not as good as *Mass*, but as one would expect with the genre, it remains rather moving. The film excels by aiming small; three students who found themselves in the same bathroom during the shooting (and the main character's family. Jenna Ortega (*Stuck in the Middle*) is rather good, along with Maddie Ziegler and Lumi Pollack. By focusing on the evolving relationships and coping styles the film is really good. Though by aiming small with the personal aftermath, the films sputters at times. Even at 90-some minutes it feels slow at points, and the plot unfortunately settles into a rhythm of the main character alternating who they are hanging out in a rather episodic fashion. Despite the criticism of the plot writer-director Megan Park (in her directorial debut) does put subtle character development throughout the film (e.g.; Ortega's character is lounging/moping on the couch while in the background her younger sister films a Tik Tok dance; one still has their youth while the other had had it snatched from them). It is the multiple little moments that elevate the film. [GLAAD – Outstanding Streaming Film Nominee], *HBOMax.*

24. **X:** The film that has now launched a franchise. Written, directed, and produced by Ti West (*In A Valley of Violence*), the film blends horror with some comedy and – as the title suggests – some soft-core pornography. The balance works (though at times the film feels like *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*

meets *Red Rocket*; in fact one wishes Simon Rex was in it). Mia Goth is rather good. Kid Cudi (*My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*) is in it! Jenna Ortega (*The Fallout*) is solid. There are a few good kills, but the film is rarely scary. The practical effects make said kills look good. What makes the film good are the characters, even the eventual killer elicits sympathy (the film starts with cops at the 'crime' scene and the cuts to 24 Hours Earlier). Within the sympathetic killer is the viewer is given multiple options for their motivation. [Critic's Choice Super Awards – Best Horror Movie Nominee].

23. **Vesper:** A nice post-apocalyptic sci-fi movie. The strength of the film is the practical effects (combined with some on-location filming in Lithuania). The film really creates the visuals of the floundering society. There are a few too many themes (and a few plot points left unexplained, in a way that works). The characters have enough development and there is enough new to keep the film going. Somehow the film is simultaneously too-long and too-short (it takes a while to get going and then wraps up too quickly). I strongly suggest watching *Vesper* and *Prospect* as a fun young-adult dystopian sci-fi double feature. [Well-reviewed Sci-fi].

Tier 4: Great Performances and Great Visuals

22. **All Quiet on the Western Front:** The film starts of excellently as a tour de force (including some amazing cinematography and editing; the cut from the sewing machine to the belt on the truck was amazing). Though the momentum starts to wear out and shortly before the halfway point the film starts to drag. It finds itself again in an excellent battle sequence (it looks perfect, and puts a lot of *1917* to shame). The score is also rather good at times. Albrecht Schuch is rather good in a supporting role (perhaps the only acting stand out; the actor who plays Paul is good but nothing worth special praise). The issue is the final 30 minutes. How the final sequences fail contains spoilers (so stop reading now). The characters behave in odd ways, if you know it is the last day of war there are certain items you'd no longer do. Also the film completely makes up the ending (in that it does not appear to have happened in real-life) to make easy points about the futility of war and for the reasons men go into war (the ending is so atrocious the film could easily rank *multiple* tiers lower). The irony is on the last day of the war it was *the Americans* who initiated a last-minute offensive. The same idea could have been shown while being historically accurate! By shoehorning an ending (that will always be inferior to the 1930 version) the film ends on a flat note. [Oscars – Best Cinematography Winner], *Netflix*.

21. **To Leslie:** Andrea Riseborough (*Nancy* and *Possessor*) deserved the Oscar nomination. Full stop. For the most part this is a film we've seen a million times: a woman suffers from alcoholism and it tears apart her life. Yet, Riseborough is so good the viewer buys into the titular Leslie's struggle. Without Riseborough the film would be a two hour slog. Riseborough's excellent performance is completed by three supporting roles by actors who've perfected their specific character: Marc Maron is the well-meaning supporter of the downtrodden, Allison Janney is the rude asshat, and Andre Royo is the aloof-but-kind friend. Each of those three is great and helps round out the film. The soundtrack of classic country songs is perfect. The film captures the feel of small-town west Texas life (and it was someone filmed in LA!; an attentive viewer will notice there are few landscape shots, and few wide establishing shots). It is a film you've seen before, but the acting overcomes the familiarity. [Oscars – Best Actress Nominee].

20. **The Whale:** One of the more polarizing films of the year, and most of the poor reviews do not make sense to me. The criticism that the film feels like a play is fine by me (see *The Outfit*), perhaps the reviews know what Aaronfsky is capable of (*Black Swan*, *The Wrestler*) and wanted those cinematic flourishes (the only one involves the Zoom screen for his online course). Admittedly the plot gets melodramatic and spells out a few things, yet the plot also slowly reveals information (perhaps some

views guessed the various reveals?), but the acting is so good it is easy to ignore and forgive the melodrama. Brendan Fraser, Sadie Sink, and Hong Chau are all great. Other reviewers complaining about the film being fatphobic, do not land with me either. Partially because the character does hate what he's become and that eating is his copying mechanism. The film does feel a tad dated (even if set in 2016, a lot of the themes feel more at home in the Bush-era). The ending shot it kinda dumb, that criticism lands. I also could be partially biased as Fraser's character is a college professor who is fed up with the forced monotony of his student's essays (and wishes they'd write something real and honest). There are some flaws, but most can be forgiven if you get in the groove of watching the great performances. [Oscars – Best Actor Winner].

19. **The Inspection:** Elegance Bratton's feature film debut, written by him about his own experience in the Marines as a gay man. Jeremy Pope (*One Night in Miami*) as amazing in the lead role; and thankfully received multiple nominations. Gabrielle Union (*Bring It On*) is also amazing as the homophobic mother; and thankfully received multiple nominations. Each play off each other making for multiple moving moments. Raúl Castillo also continues his run of solid supporting performances. The film does suffer from clichés, yet 2005 wasn't that long ago and sadly that is what life was like then. There are enough supporting characters to round out the film and make it about more than coming to terms with ones sexuality. The initial shower sequence is amazing and one of the better scenes of the year. [Independent Spirit – Best First Feature Nominee].

18. **Marcel the Shell with Shoes On:** An absolute of a delight; tragic yet heart-warming and optimistic. The closest thing to *Paddington* as I've seen. It is the best film that is (partially) animated, but not the best animated film; the titular Marcel and the other shells are stop-motion but set in a real house, with real people (and animals) who interact with Marcel. Jenny Slate (*Obvious Child*) delivers the voice performance of the year as Marcel. Dean Fleischer Camp plays a fictionalized version of himself and serves as director (and is also Slate's ex-husband). Putting it in the same breath as *Paddington* is the highest praise one can give it. [Oscars – Best Animated Film Nominee], *Hulu.*

17. **Pearl:** The prequel to *X*. By most standards it is inferior to *X*. The various mysterious in the first film are made concrete (and often done in an inferior way). For the first hour-and-fifteen minutes, *Pearl* is the inferior film. It is two-to-four sequences near the end that elevate the film so much it not only moves above *X*, it leap-frogs into a higher tier. The first is Mia Goth (*High Life*) putting in a tour de force monologue (the fourth is Mia Goth putting in another tour de force during the credits). The monologue, both in writing and acting is amazing; of which roughly seven minutes is uncut perfection. It was a performance deserving of accolades. The other sequences include some solid editing and tracking shots. It is an example of how a few moments of greatness can elevate a film. I can't wait for this franchise to continue as there are at least two more films that should be made, one of which is already in production. [Independent Spirit – Best Lead Performance Nominee].

16. **Avatar: The Way of Water:** For the second go-around the script is at least a slight improvement. The script it still fairly standard and makes sure to explain everything to the viewer. Also the film is decidedly PG-13 and that is a mild drag. There are roughly eight different endings (few of which were needed)—all of which then push the runtime over three hours. Most of the cast puts in bland performances (what do you expect when the script doesn't develop characters) outside of Sigourney Weaver. Yet for all of these flaws, James Cameron can deliver a visual spectacle. The film looks gorgeous. The underwater motion capture is literally boundary pushing (and the primary reason for the delay in production). The various sea beasts put those in *The Sea Beast* to shame. The final act is both *Titanic* and *The Abyss*. One of the best moments is when a submarine (which looks awesome by itself), crashes and water rushes in. It looks amazing. It will leave you wondering what was real and what was not (during production). Enjoy the visual spectacle that only Cameron can provide. [Oscars – Best Picture Nominee].

Tier 3: Feminism, and Nic Cage

15. **She Said:** Another solid film in the investigative journalism genre. It doesn't quite match up with the previous greats. Though I imagine this will get better with age (unlike say *Spotlight*, the #MeToo movement, and Harvey Weinstein in particular are semi-fresh in the viewer's mind; this film was five years after the initial articles, whereas *Spotlight* was 12). Zoe Kazan (*The Big Sick*) puts in a solid performance. Carey Mulligan is amazing as always. The film rarely bogs down, and avoids becoming preachy (there might be one or two minor lapses). The use of voicemails and recordings is nice and hits home, but that was really the only cinematic touch. [WGA Awards – Best Adapted Screenplay Nominee], *Peacock*.

14. **Women Talking:** The film is almost impossible to distinguish from *She Said*. Neither are overly cinematic (this one contains some nice lighting in the various hayloft shots). Both are held together by a solid script and acting. *Women Talking* gets the nod as an overall film as the ensemble cast did a much better job (Jessie Buckley, Rooney Mara, Claire Foy, Sheila McCarthy, Ben Whishaw, among others). This film also works as on a few more levels beyond dealing with sexual assault. One easily imagines this being a meta-commentary on the formation of the United States (as although set in 2010, the film takes place on a religious colony). The acting and a script that does not bog down keep the film powerful albeit a notch below many of the Oscar nominees for the year. [Oscars – Best Adapted Screenplay Winner].

13. **The Unbearable Weight of Massive Talent:** A role only Nic Cage (*Mandy, Joe, Pig, Wild at Heart, Raising Arizona, Moonstruck*) can play. As despite Nic Cage being known for some bad action movies, the last nine-ish years (2007–2012 probably being his 'peak' years of bad movies; the infamous College Humor video was 2010) he's been putting in a lot of good work in smaller films. And at the beginning of his career he was in great films. The film leans into the crazy that has been Cage's career (the bad and the good), and each time it goes to the well there is water (plus I assume some deeper cuts of his career I missed). *Talent* also succeeds as two of the greatest films of all time are used as plot devices: *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (I have it first on my 1920 list!) and *Paddington 2*. Both of which have a case for best film ever, for wildly different reasons. Pedro Pascal (*Prospect*) is a fabulous co-lead and pairs with Cage perfectly. Sadly no (major) organization had fun with their year-end awards and nominated Cage and Pascal. Still sadly no one gave this a screenplay nomination. It is a well-made, fun film that also—somehow, reminds us all why we watch/make movies in the first place. [Critics Choice Super Awards – Best Action Movie Nominee].

12. **The Woman King:** Gina Prince-Bythewood (*The Old Guard*) has cemented herself as one of the better action-movie directors. Like *The Old Guard*, the film brings enough social commentary to a movie that is full of battle scenes. It also helps when Viola Davis. Yes, Davis technically has an Oscar (for a supporting performance), but it still feels wrong that she does not have a lead actress award. She carries movies and has been carrying them for many years now. She is one of the all-time greats. Thuso Mbedu is the breakout start (she has done award-winning work on television); it isn't easy going toe-to-toe with Viola Davis. The sets and costumes are rather nice. The battle sequences are decent. The film does drag at times, takes a while to get going, and has a few too many endings. But even with those flaws, when the film hits it hits hard. [SAG Awards – Best Actress Nominee], *Netflix*.

11. **Till:** Another entry in the expanding Civil Rights Biopic genre (*Marshall, Selma, Loving, Just Mercy* all come to mind). The film is expertly helmed by Chinonye Chukwu (*Clemency*) who has established a penchant for getting great performances from leading ladies and for beautifully composed long shots. The film features multiple long shots, letting the emotional weight of the subject matter – and there are a lot of these powerful moments – (Emmett Till's lynching) carry through (perhaps the best examples are the first uncovering of the body and the Mamie Till's testimony during the

trial). The unbroken testimony will be used in Danielle Deadwyler's (*The Harder They Fall*) for-your-consideration reel in awards season. It is a really good performance though I would not say it is the best of the year. The film is a little too long, and the pre-murder scenes could have been cut to trim the slightly-over-two-hours run time. The film succeeds the most as a character drama. Mamie Till's transformation from grieving mother, to reluctant activist, to a full-fledged major character in the Civil Rights movement. [SAG Awards – Best Actress Nominee].

10. **After Yang:** Written and directed by Kogonada (*Columbus*), he is one of the better directors going. The visual style is still great, though not as impressive as in *Columbus*. Colin Farrell was rather good, as was Justin H. Min (*The Umbrella Academy*); whereas Jodie Turner-Smith (*Queen & Slim*) left a lot to be desired; it doesn't help she has the least developed character. The tea scene with Farrell and Min is one of the best of the year. The film partially succeeds by going in directions that are not expected. It ends up being a lovely and tender film on humanity and love. One wishes it was a little more mysterious, as the viewer can easily follow along with the science-fiction. [Independent Spirit – Best Director Nominee].

9. **Tár:** The film starts off excellently with multiple long scenes that are carried by the talent of Cate Blanchett (*Blue Jasmine*), all of which service to introduce the main character. The scene at Julliard is a masterclass in acting, script writing, and the technical aspects of film making (it is perhaps the best scene of the year). Sadly in the remaining two-plus hours the film can not maintain that level of excellence. The shots remain well-composed (and often long), the script contains main callbacks, and ambiguities. What remains is a good film about power dynamics and cancel culture. The ambiguities allow for multiple interpretations, compared to the other films on the topic in this tier. Sadly, it is a film you want to be better, but (partially due to its run time) can not reach the lofty heights it aims for. [Oscars – Best Picture Nominee], *Peacock*.

8. **God's Creatures:** The film almost was in the next tier, but can't rank higher because of the sound. The common criticism of not being able to hear dialogue is on full display. Multiple scenes are borderline inaudible. It is very easy to lose interest before the film gets going. Once it gets going, the film quickly becomes a masterclass in acting, screenwriting, and character development. Emily Watson (*Chernobyl*) is great. Paul Mescal (*The Lost Daughter*) is great. Aisling Franciosi (*The Nightingale*) is great. Going into specifics risk spoilers, but the film excels by keeping both plot points and the film's end point ambiguous for as long as possible. [British Independent Film – Best Debut Screenwriter Nominee].

Tier 2: As Always, Films That Could Be the Best of the Year, but Aren't Mine

7. **Top Gun: Maverick:** Believe the hype and the nominations. The sound, editing, and effects are top notch. There is a reason Tom Cruise pushed for a theatrical release (and was rewarded for it). The film is a good old-fashioned blockbuster. In an era of CGI, it is a great reminder of films with practical effects (though apparently some of the jets were CGI'd into the film). Everything looks real. Everything sounds real. It is how films should be made. The editing (including the sound) make you feel the intensity. The script itself is a tad predictable, and the film is best interpreted as Maverick's dream sequence after dying in the opening crash (also makes it easier to forgive some plot holes and craziness). The film is also a peak Gen X movie experience, complete with the regrets of the past. [Oscars – Best Sound Winner], *Amazon Prime* and *Paramount+*.

6. **We're All Going to the World's Fair:** Written, directed, and edited by Jane Schoenbrun in their directorial debut, and what a show of promise the film ends up being. Speaking of promising debut, Anna Cobb makes her debut in the film and is an absolute stand out. She carries the opening scene, instantly grabbing the viewer's attention. The film is only 85 minutes, which is perfect, anything longer and the film would have bogged down. The film is a perfect example of why I have been

hyping the horror genre for years now. It might be the best film about growing up in the age of the internet (and internet culture as well), even better than *Eighth Grade*. The film defies a lot of what is expected from the horror genre (especially with a film such as *Host* coming out recently), but like all of the horrors I've ranked highly ends up being a deeply moving character drama and social commentary disguised as a fright. [Sundance – NEXT Innovator Nominee], *HBOMax*.

5. **Aftersun:** In her first film writer-director Charlotte Wells has established herself as a force to be reckoned with. The film excels as it shows the viewer everything, without telling them anything. It is an idea you've seen a hundred times: young-and-divorced father takes his ten year old daughter on a fancy vacation. We know they are no longer in each others lives, but why? Slowly it is revealed to the audience, with there being so many signs along the way that were initially missed. It is excellently written. There are a few wonderful shots, particularly one with the father's reflection in both the tv screen and the mirror. Paul Mescal (*God's Creatures*) is rather good (within one year has established himself as a top young actor), and the Frankie Corio is amazing and will go down as a casting find of legend. Corio adds such depth, a combination of innocence and figuring the world out, that even without the father–daughter dynamic the film would work solely as a coming-of-age story. Whatever Wells does next, sign me up. [Independent Spirit – Best First Feature Winner].

4. **The Banshees of Inisherin:** Written and directed by Martin McDonagh (*Three Billboards*), the film is excellent. McDonagh's script is near perfect. The premise of the film is rather simple and not much actually happens: a man decides he doesn't want to be friends anymore. The film follows the fallout. Yet the script has multiple feckin hilarious jokes (the film is surprisingly gif-able). The direction and camerawork are also impeccable (the Irish countryside is also an undefeated filming location); great use of shadows, and blocking. The film looks gorgeous (again, very little happens yet it all works). Colin Farrell (*The Killing of the Sacred Deer*), before this year has never received an Oscar nomination, which seems wrong. Farrell give one of the best performances of the year. A lesser actor could not have imparted the character's combination of good intentions and simple-mindedness. Brendan Gleeson (*Calvary*), before this year has never received an Oscar nomination, which seems wrong. Barry Keoghan (*Calm With Horses*), before this year has never received an Oscar nomination, which seems wrong. Koeghan is perfect in his role as the neglected/beaten town loser/dunce. The film is a lovely analysis of friendship and loneliness. [Oscars – Best Original Screenplay Nominee], *HBOMax*.

3. **The Northman:** Robert Eggers (*The VVitch* and *The Lighthouse*) continues his string of greatness. Like his previous two films the strength is the cinematography (all done by Jarin Blaschke). The Beserker town-storming sequence is one of the best of the year. It is visually brilliant. Other great shots include those on ships (the camera moves around nimbly in confined spaces) and any shot at night. The (artificial) moonlight and subsequent shadows looks amazing. The cast is an all-star cast (Ethan Hawke, Nicole Kidman, William DeFoe, Alexander Skarsgård, and Anya Taylor-Joy), but none of them really stand out. There is nice character development, but the script is secondary to the visuals (the script is still solid). The script also features enough new items on the revenge tale to stay fresh-enough. The sets and score are also rather good. But the reason to watch is the visuals and they are some of the best in recent memory. [Critic's Choice Super Awards – Best Sci-fi/Fantasy Movie Nominee], *Amazon Prime*.

2. **Everything Everywhere All At Once:** The viewer needs to survive the first 15–20 minutes. The start of the film is not very good. Also, the film ends roughly exactly how one expects it to end (well, with a few multiverse surprises). There is also the issue that the film is a little too interested in being a comment on today; the 'worst time-line' is often used. Some of the positive reception has to be a result of offering a hopeful message even if in the worst time-line. Also, the film has about four different endings. The cast is a knock-out: Stephanie Hsu (*The Marvelous Mrs Maisel* and *The SpongeBob Musical*), Ke Huy Quan (*Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*), James Hong (*Blade*

Runner), Biff Wiff (*I Think You Should Leave*) has a bit part, Jamie Lee Curtis (*Halloween*) is great, and of course Michelle Yeoh *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon.* The editing is elite. Characters multi-verse jump seamlessly (often times the aspect ratio even changes, yet the edit it so clean it hard to notice at first). The film is hilarious and features some of the funniest/absurdest sequences in years. The emotional moments hit hard, even as the view could see them coming a universe away (at least most of them). The second film by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert (*Swiss Army Knife*), the team has established themselves as one of the best out-of-the-box filmmakers. [Oscars – Best Picture Winner], *Paramount+*.

Tier 1: I Can't Believe I Have Spielberg One

1. **The Fabelmans:** I am an unabashed Spielberg-disliker. Most of his films are overly sentimental puff pieces, though almost always well-made. *West Side Story* and *The Post* received better reviews than most from me. Whereas *War Horse*, *Lincoln*, and *Bridge of Spies* not so much. I wont even bother with his non-*Jaws* more-famous work (okay, I can't pass up a dig at *Saving Private Ryan* and how you should turn it off after the first 30 minutes). The film has all the Spielberg classic touches: i) technical excellence in film making, and ii) a family falling apart. Yet, here Spielberg is finally introspective, we see the family slowly falling apart (with Michelle Williams and Paul Dano playing their parts perfectly). Seth Rogan is in a supporting role, and deserving of a nomination. Although the film partially exceeds as it reminds the viewer of the power and magic of movie making, it is not ranked this highly based on sentimentality. Every scene following the more documentary filming (showing his mother the camping video, the senior skip day movie, and the moving into the new home) are pure excellence. The script is extremely tight, with multiple subtle callbacks (did you check the mail?). It has taken a long time, but Spielberg has finally created a complete film worthy of his reputation. [Oscars – Best Picture Nominee].