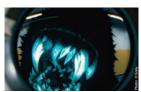


While the majors seemed content to contribute little more than remakes, sequels and knockoffs to the genre scene this past year, there was lots of exciting stuff going on in the independent/foreign-film realm. The wealth of fine features from outside the studio system made it tough to narrow down a top-10 selection.

The lists below are composed of movies that received some kind of commercial U.S. release in 2011 (a couple of worthy flicks seen at festivals will have to wait till next year). The titles are arranged in alphabetical order, though the film that ranks first that way was also my very favorite among this crop:



ATTACK THE BLOCK: Joe Cornish's knockout directorial debut has seriously cool monsters, a riproaring pace, cleverly staged action, engaging characters (a gang of young British apartment-house hooligans who become heroes when the aliens invade), just the right touch of social commentary and loads of laughs that leaven but don't undercut the seriousness of the situation. What more could you ask for?

BLACK DEATH: Good and evil have never been more mutable concepts than in Christopher Smith's compelling and truly chilling medieval saga, following knights on a quest to quell the Black Plague that eventually reveals the most virulent disease to be that spawned within human hearts. (Review)

INSIDIOUS (pictured at top): Having helped spawn one of the more savage strains of modern horror with SAW, James Wan and Leigh Whannell go back to genre basics and come up with a haunted-family tale that gets great eerie mileage out of rich, cost-effective atmosphere, imaginative staging and perfect timing that has you shivering in your seat when you're not jumping out of it.

KIDNAPPED: The very last bit is unnecessarily cruel, but for the rest of the running time, Spanish filmmaker Miguel Ángel Vivas earns the right to the uncompromising torment meted out against an innocent family by ruthless home invaders. The long single takes he employs keep you involved with their plight throughout, with violent outbursts that are alternately harrowing and cathartic. Extra points to one of the most marvelous uses of split screen ever.



A LONELY PLACE TO DIE: You should have been able to catch this grandly filmed outdoor thriller on the big screen, but it was relegated by IFC Films to barely-there theatrical release and VOD play. Any way you can see it, though (the DVD is coming next year), don't miss Julian Gilbey's twisty survival story with an impressive lead performance by Melissa George. (Revie)

MARTHA MARCY MAY MARLENE/TAKE SHELTER: Are these really horror films? If you're asking that, then also ask yourself this: Is ROSEMARY'S BABY a horror film? If that gets a yes, then so does the first question. Like Roman Polanski's classic, MARTHA and SHELTER are dark dramas in which the threat is not overt, but always lingering in the margins, gnawing at the psyches of their paranoid protagonists and putting a serious creep into audiences. Do things ultimately become as hellish for MARTHA's Elizabeth Olsen and SHELTER's Michael Shannon (two of the year's most exemplary performances in any genre) as they do for Mia Farrow? If you haven't already, see the movies (they hit the home market in early 2012) to find out.

STAKE LAND: Postapocalyptic/undead films are everywhere these days, but Jim Mickle and Nick Damici's entry is a different beast: one more concerned with getting to the hearts of its characters than ripping them out. There are scares aplenty, and remarkable imagery on a low budget, yet what sticks with you the most are the people struggling through a world that has

fallen to the inhuman. (Review)

SUPER 8: A monster movie about loving monster movies, a Steven Spielberg production about growing up at a time when going to Spielberg movies inspired a generation of budding auteurs to shoot their own horror/sci-fi epics on Super-8 film. J.J. Abrams finds just the right balance of unforced nostalgia, youthful camaraderie and big-ticket special-FX thrills. (Review)



TUCKER AND DALE VS. EVIL: A neat switch on backwoods-horror standards that doesn't simply rest on its role reversal (the scruffy hillbillies are the good guys and the visiting college kids keep managing to blunder into their own deaths). Director/co-writer Eli Craig sweetens the premise with a series of hilarious situations and comically splattery setpieces, while the unlikely burgeoning relationship between Dale (Tyler Labine) and coed Allison (Katrina Bowden) adds unexpected emotional seasoning.

Also hailing from other countries and making strong impressions were Norway's THE TROLL HUNTER (if I was doing a top-11 list, that would be the extra title), Spanish bad-boy Pedro Almodóvar's THE SKIN I LIVE IN, the Africa-lensed THE DEAD, Korea's I SAW THE DEVIL, Australia's THE REEF and A SERBIAN FILM, which I can't exactly say I enjoyed, but whose power can't be denied. Among the plentiful crop of indie follow-ups, BEREAVEMENT was one of the few to stand on its own with a singular scary identity, while DRIVE ANGRY (is there any actor more suited for 3D than Nicolas Cage?) was easily the year's most pleasurable guilty pleasure.

Speaking of 3D flicks, one of those tops (or bottoms) the list of 2011's dishonorable mentions (omitting any number of direct-to-DVD seguels, 'cause that would be just too easy):



SHARK NIGHT 3D: In which a group of fresh young actors manage to keep straight faces, while they and a team of Hollywood professionals play the most mindbendingly illogical and ludicrous scenario since ANACONDAS: THE HUNT FOR THE BLOOD ORCHID with utterly unjustifiable seriousness.

CREATURE: Just because you've rehashed every cliché in the monster-movie playbook doesn't mean you've created a clever (or scary, or funny, or meaningful) homage to the form. In fairness, lead actor Mehcad Brooks, despite his crucial tussle with the monster being played entirely off screen, conveys real strength and dignity. He and his character deserve a better movie.

DYLAN DOG: DEAD OF NIGHT: SUPERMAN RETURNS has a rep (unwarranted, says I) as a disappointment; was Brandon Routh trying to assure it wasn't his lowest-regarded comics-based film by appearing in this one? Its makers somehow managed to turn Tiziano Sclavi's memorably quirky creation into something resembling a rejected Syfy pilot.



THE HUMAN CENTIPEDE II (FULL SEQUENCE): Tom Six's sequel proves that incessantly namechecking your previous movie isn't the same thing as satirizing it, and that shooting it in black and white neither transforms it into art nor makes its gratuitous, pointless cruelty any easier to stomach. Would that IFC Films gave a fifth of the marketing push to worthy movies like A LONELY PLACE TO DIE that it does to these imitation provocations.

THE ROOMMATE: The story of a college girl who tries desperately to emulate her new roomie's life and seriously f**ks everything up, this movie tries desperately to emulate SINGLE WHITE FEMALE and...

THE TWILIGHT SAGA: BREAKING DAWN: Just for the record, I don't have anything categorically against mixing vampires and werewolves with teen themes and romance; TV's BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER did it memorably, and sometimes brilliantly, for seven seasons. And this particular franchise was incrementally getting better with each film. But BREAKING DAWN puts it on my worst list for the first time by stretching about 20 minutes of plot into two tedious hours (in the course of making a shameless cash grab by dividing one

2011: The Year in Horror—Mike's Best and Worst Movies

Written by Michael Gingold Thursday, 29 December 2011 12:48

book into two movies) and, even with all that screen time, never giving us one scene reasonably explaining why heroine Bella (Kristen Stewart) insists on carrying to term a hybrid baby whose birth is likely to kill her.