In my 2011 best-of list, I discussed how it had not been a banner year for horror; I was especially critical of the studio releases. That year, I sought solace in TV shows to feed my genre lust, and my list was peppered with horror titles like DEXTER, THE WALKING DEAD, AMERICAN HORROR STORY, GRIMM and UGLY AMERICANS. This year, however, I was happy to find some stellar titles lurking in the feature world, a big improvement over 2011.

A few major-studio titles even made their way onto my list. So long, 2012! Here is the horror I plan to take with me from this past year:

JOHN DIES AT THE END (pictured above): This one starting making the festival rounds in 2012 and just made it to VOD, with theatrical play coming in early 2013. From the renowned book comes the tale of David Wong and his interdimensional experiences with the drug "Soy Sauce." This is quite possibly one of Don Coscarelli's best films!

THE LOVED ONES: This one is a bit strange to add to my list, because it was made years ago and then became stuck in distribution hell. But 2012 finally saw the limited theatrical/DVD release of this comedic torture flick focusing on a prom night from hell.

THE CABIN IN THE WOODS (pictured right): I actually didn't love this movie the first time I saw it. I felt like it was poking fun at how simplistic the horror genre can sometimes be. CABIN had to sit on my palate for a day or two before I wanted to check it out a second time. After that follow-up viewing, I was quick to declare this not only one of the best films of the year, but also

one of the smartest horror films I have seen in a long time. It is not at all poking fun; it is a group of horror fans giving a loving nod and hug to the genre we all adore.

BEYOND THE BLACK RAINBOW: This movie is a slow burn, but you'll never notice the snail-like pacing amidst the stellar visuals and vivid color palette. It not only renewed my faith in creativity within the horror world, it reinvigorated my own love of filmmaking, reminding me that horror and art can create a beautifully disturbing dance of fearful perfection.

ABSENTIA: This quiet indie film packs quite a horrific punch. It's a great example of microbudget filmmaking at its best. As a woman and her sister begin to trace disappearances to a local tunnel, a disturbing story of underground dwellers develops. ABSENTIA lacks gore, but more than makes up for it in mood and subtle terror. I now show this one to my film students as an example of how to make a topnotch film on a shoestring budget.

THE AMERICAN SCREAM: I seriously cried during this documentary (just out on self-distributed DVD). I know that may not be the best endorsement I could give a film, but this one is truly moving for horror fans. It focuses on "home haunters," and the subjects' energy and passion for spookery and Halloween oozes off the screen. It is also hilarious and remarkably well-constructed, but again—it's the passion. Let me put it this way: I saw THE AMERICAN SCREAM in a screening at a Los Angeles horror festival. All the people in the audience were genre fans, many of them from the horror industry, and I was one of many who were misty-eyed and remembering the joy and magic we collectively experience on the scariest night of the year.

PROMETHEUS: This ALIEN prequel reinvigorated my love of sci-fi/horror genre blends. Full of gorgeous visuals in epic 3D, PROMETHEUS was one of the highlights of my year, and the "C-section" scene will haunt me for quite a while. I know much of the populace hated this one, but I'm still mesmerized by it!

AMERICAN HORROR STORY (pictured left): I know, this isn't a feature film—but as I said last year, my list focuses on the most brilliant of the year's scary stuff, and AMERICAN HORROR STORY is about as brilliant as it gets! This second season brought nuns, Nazis, demonic possession and aliens, and yet somehow effectively meshed this strange amalgam of terrors with racial and gender issues.

THE WOMAN IN BLACK: This movie did have some flaws, but ultimately I found it to be a classic old-school Gothic haunted-house film. Daniel Radcliffe packs a great post-Potter performance, and the ghostly chills are unnerving and well-executed.

THE BAY: This was my fave film of 2012, which is rather shocking because 1) the film received a very limited release and limited press, and 2) I usually hate found-footage films. Yet for some reason, this movie was exactly what I was looking for. It was directed by veteran Barry Levinson, who breathed new life into the overdone approach with inventive camera and story tactics. Additionally, this tale of flesheating parasites is jam-packed with some of the goriest and most disturbing FX I saw this year. This one will give even the hardest horror fan the shivers!

My 2012 runner-ups:

EXCISION: This bloody tale is ultimately a smart teen coming-of-age story with a dark twist. Hopefully we will be seeing more from director Richard Bates Jr.

HERE COMES THE DEVIL: This Mexican horror film (another festival fave hitting theaters in '13) is full of atmosphere and inventive storytelling. This flick is spooky as hell!

BAIT: I'm a sucker for shark films, and this has sharks…in 3D…in a grocery store. This was my sugary candy of horror films for the year: no real substance, but who cares when it tastes so good!

My 2012 titles to avoid:

CHERNOBYL DIARIES (pictured right): While THE BAY was found footage at its best, this one was handheld horror at its worst. I left frustrated by the plot and suffering from a terrible motion-sickness headache.

THE APPARITION: Teenybopper fodder in the form of a horror film. Plus, it was full of more overt product placement than I could keep track of. Costco? What the hell?

THE DEVIL INSIDE: Another found-footage flick that left me unfulfilled—which is sad, because I love evil-nun movies. The film lacked pizzazz; it was just a boring mess wrapped in a very clever marketing campaign.

LOVELY MOLLY: Most of the FANGORIA staff disagree with me on this one, but I was bored to tears by this dark tale. And I don't mean dark just to describe the tone; the lighting was just plain dark. I had no idea what I was looking at or what was going on for much of the film. Maybe I just saw a bad screening with a crap projectionist, but what I did see didn't leave me intrigued enough to try this one for a second time.

So what am I looking forward to in 2013? MAMA looks epically creepy, and CARRIE will hopefully bring some exciting gender issues to the genre. On the other end of my enjoyment spectrum, THE HAUNTING IN CONNECTICUT 2: GHOSTS OF GEORGIA already has me geographically confused.

So what stellar films of 2012 did I miss? Any bad ones I should have mentioned as well?