It was quite an interesting year for genre cinema—one reason being that a number of its best examples weren't strictly fright films, but mixed horror elements into stories with other emotional beats. This made for quite a welcome variety amidst the usual remakes, sequels and trend-hoppers.

There was no one film that I could truly choose as the best of the best, so the Top 10 list below is in alphabetical order. I've restricted my choices to movies that got some kind of commercial U.S. release in 2010—and how encouraging it is that three films I saw at festivals and could have easily included (BLACK DEATH, STAKE LAND and KIDNAPPED) have nailed down distribution for 2011.

AMER (pictured right): A kaleidoscope of color and sound and blood and sex and split screens and fractured psyches, distilling the *giallo* genre down to its visceral and psychological essence and providing a serious cinematic rush. Kudos to Belgian writer/directors Hélène Cattet and Bruno Forzani for one of most arresting feature debuts in recent memory.

BEST WORST MOVIE: No movie that inspires a documentary this winning can be all bad, and whatever its ridiculous faults, TROLL 2 is unique enough to have spawned a sizable cult following for itself, its creators and its nonpro cast—all of whom are celebrated in affectionate and enormously entertaining fashion by preteen TROLL 2 star-turned-filmmaker Michael Paul Stephenson.

BLACK SWAN (pictured at top): Natalie Portman dances and self-destructs her way into the pantheon of great disturbed heroines in Darren Aronofsky's riveting character drama-cum-psychological shocker. How gratifying to see a movie this daring, stylistically ambitious and downright unnerving drawing such crowds in a season of big-screen holiday fluff.

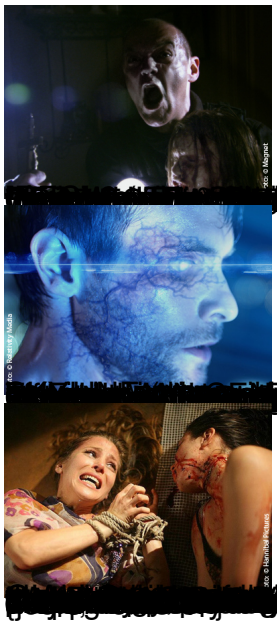
BURIED: What could be scarier than waking up confined to a coffinlike box several feet underground…and slowly learning that your life is in the hands of people who see you less as a person than as a political softball? Ryan Reynolds is a perfect Everyman hero/victim in Rodrigo Cortes' sweat-inducing exercise in topical claustrophobia.

THE HORSEMAN (pictured left): A vengeful father gains justice and loses his soul in this shattering first feature by Aussie Steven Kastrissios. The pornographers and other human vermin who get theirs in the worst possible ways surely deserve it, but it's the movie's accomplishment that the violence is horrifying nonetheless.

I SELL THE DEAD: One of those rare movies that improves on second viewing; once you're used to the episodic storytelling, you can fully immerse yourself in the rich, flavorful characterizations and fine period atmosphere elicited on a tiny budget. FX-artist-turned-writer/director Glenn McQuaid provides plenty of spooky and funny moments along the way.

LET ME IN: A few missteps (like vampire Abby's CGI-enhanced attacks) prevent this from achieving the heights of the original LET THE RIGHT ONE IN, but they're subsidiary. With striking performances by Chloë Grace Moretz and Kodi Smit-McPhee, writer/director Matt Reeves recaptures the heart and adds a few effective new wrinkles to the relationship between a bullied boy and bloodsucking girl, forged in shared loneliness and sealed with blood.

MONSTERS: The U.S./Mexico border has finally been walled off thanks to an infestation by towering extraterrestrial beings, but the essence of Gareth Edwards' movie (yet another impressive filmmaking debut, again by an FX wiz) is not their threat but how a journalist and the boss' daughter he at first reluctantly escorts through the quarantined zone navigate the literal alien territory. The creatures may be largely unseen, but Edwards makes their every appearance count.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