This year marks the second I've taken to posting a top ten, and while for the most part, the ranking is fairly arbitrary (there are only one or two films on this list I really hold above the others), lists such as these are useful in that it's often surprising and invigorating to dig through the past twelve months and realize just how many films I was excited, moved and challenged by.

"Challenged" or "challenging" seem to be my key word(s) this year, as some of the bangers below really put their audience to the test; engaging, shocking, provoking and really pushing you to reflect just how you feel about the goings on. What also has my proverbial fist in the air about this past year is the spectrum covered, both in the variety of films and the span of the calendar.

I'm happy to believe it was a good year. It was difficult to get this list down and even in its trimming, Magnolia Pictures still wound up distributing four of the titles, so good on them for continuing to bring great international and independent genre titles stateside.

Here it is (the * indicates that the film is currently on Netflix Instant):

10. HOBO WITH A SHOTGUN (Dir. Jason Eisener)*

HOBO is such a perfect combination of insanity, savagery, wonderful filmmaking and pure love, it's dizzying. There's an aesthetic and tone that's easily compared, and to which the homage is easily discovered, but the film still feels wholly born of its director, Jason Eisener. It's simply the best to be spawned from GRINDHOUSE, and that's mainly because it goes harder than any of the others, is crafted better than the others and is so clearly a batshit vision of its captain and his crew, and the stunningly dedicated performance of Rutger Hauer. To put it a bit more clearly, here's the last paragraph of my theatrical review :

It sounds odd to throw the word "sweet" into the mix, but there's no doubt HOBO ends excitedly, more amped-up than downtrodden and, as aforementioned, pulls together nicely with the inclusion of "Run With Us." The song not only speaks to the general tone of everything that has come before it, but its relative obscurity speaks to Eisener's specific, fully realized vision. It's a touch that only could've come from a director, or writer, who was dying to see it used, and adds a personal flourish that, among many others in the film, raises HOBO above just an amalgamation of influences into a wild and original creation.

9. DREAM HOME (Dir. Ho-Cheung Pang)*

While slashers offer good, old fashioned fun, it's always been a bit disconcerting that the villain became our audience surrogate, egging on ridiculous and elaborate deaths of our peers. And truth be told, no, DREAM HOME, Hong Kong's foray into slasherdom doesn't subvert that, but it is sort of brilliant in that instead of just enjoying our pro/antagonist's spree for carnage-sake, it gives us a reason to care why she's doing it. And it works! An honest-to-god emotional connection is forged even as Chang-Lei Sheung (Josie Ho) gets down to some truly repulsive business (many of the kills are of over-the-top, but one will likely leave a bad taste). Add to that the fact that this whole affair is quite timely (the lengths we all must go to, to live our lives in a downtrodden economy), and you get a slick tale well told, or a truly bloody, smart, blackly funny film completely worthy of your attention and time.

8. THE SKIN I LIVE IN (Dir. Pedro Almodovar)

Bringing his stunning, vibrant visual style to some seriously dark places, Pedro Almodovar crafted an impeccable, elegant film around a weird, seedy mad scientist tale; one that should be experienced with only a crumb of knowledge. Like other films on this list, and thanks to the great work by Antonio Banderas and Elena Anaya, THE SKIN I LIVE IN does an incredible job manipulating your empathy. Sometimes, the most frustrating and admirable thing about a horror film is its way to tap into your own understanding of some heinous acts and in Almodovar's latest, every side has a story.

7. MARTHA MARCY MAY MARLENE (Dir. Sean Durkin) / WE NEED TO TAK ABOUT KEVIN (Dir. Lynne Ramsay)

Deservedly winning art house acclaim and Oscar talk, both MARTHA MARCY MAY MARLENE and WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT KEVIN are quiet, understated and show stopping and devastating all at once, with each film presenting exceptional takes on separate subgenres.

MARTHA MARCY MAY MARLENE, as you may well know, is the tale of the titular young lady (Elizabeth Olsen) and the aftermath of her time in a cult. Durkin's first feature is stunningly assured, from composition to his dream-like editing in which Martha's realities bleed together seamlessly, like a magic trick you want to watch over and over. It's all terrifying and tense, and ultimately (and probably most horrifying) believable.

Also dealing in aftermath, WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT KEVIN follows Tilda Swinton as she attempts to live her life in the wake of her son's school shooting. Interspersed are segments of her life with Kevin and the motherly love she never exactly felt, and the games he played from the start. A serious air of dread hangs over KEVIN as if it's an evil kid film that doesn't climax when the child is eight years old. Instead, he continues growing, learning and harvesting more apathy and murderous contempt towards his family and those around him. Swinton is expectedly excellent, as is the impossibly model-esque Ezra Miller as Kevin (who actually played Robert in the similarly unsettling AFTERSCHOOL, produced by MARTHA director Sean Durkin).

MARTHA is still in select theaters, while KEVIN receives a bigger limited release than its Oscar qualifying run on January 13.

6. THE INNKEEPERS (Dir. Ti West)

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