Horror was all over the map in 2012, in both senses of the phrase. We saw movies from across the globe—including an impressive first stab at the genre from Israel—and exercises in every subgenre imaginable. And my pick for the very top of the year's offerings combined them all into one film.

The lists below are composed of movies that received some kind of commercial U.S. release in 2012 (with the caveat that I haven't yet caught Don Coscarelli's JOHN DIES AT THE END, which VODebuts at the very end of this month). First up, the best of the best:

THE CABIN IN THE WOODS (pictured above): A knockout horror movie about horror movies, in which writer/director Drew Goddard and writer/producer Joss Whedon have their cake (satirizing and subverting the titular form) and eat it too (delivering real-deal suspense, terror, plenty of dark laughs and a marvelously sustained climactic monster blowout). Meta-horror risks condescending to the form, but every frame of this one is suffused with love for the genre. (Review)

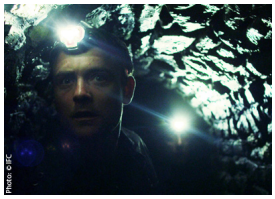
The rest, in alphabetical order:

ABSENTIA (pictured right): Writer/director Mike Flanagan makes a quietly attention-grabbing debut with this deeply felt, deeply unnerving horror/drama about a woman literally haunted by her long-vanished husband. A crucial scene in which one of his "visits" proves not to be what it first appears is one of the most spine-tingling moments in years. (Review)

THE AWAKENING: As the paranormal continues to suffuse movies and TV, a subset dealing with skepticism of the otherworldly has emerged recently, and Nick Murphy's intelligent period spooker is the best example. Rebecca Hall is terrific as a debunker in post-WWI Britain who has her beliefs and soul shaken when she visits a remote, haunted boarding school.

COMPLIANCE: Can a uniform and a badge wield power when those on the receiving end can't see them—and they don't actually exist? The answer is an unequivocal yes, as writer/director Craig Zobel presents a truly disturbing, fact-based examination of how a prank caller posing as a cop manipulates and exploits workers at a fast-food restaurant, inexorably leading the audience to question how they would react in such a situation. (Review)

THE GREY: Animals (specifically wolves) attack, but this isn't a nature-run-amok movie. Rather, director/co-writer Joe Carnahan plunges Liam Neeson and his fellow plane-crash survivors into a wild that simply goes about its ruthless business, unconcerned about the puny humans stranded within it—and the result is gripping from start to finish. (Review)



KILL LIST (pictured left): To discuss what's overtly horrific in Ben Wheatley's genre-blender would be to give his game away. Best to simply say that this study of two hitmen on a job with unexpected layers showcases a wide, chilling spectrum of the evil that men do.

PARANORMAN: Dismiss Chris Butler and Sam Fell's richly conceived and animated stop-motion adventure as a "kids' film," and you'll be missing out. The marketing's understandable emphasis on the zombies masked the fact that the story's true focus, as in the classic monster movies, is on fear—as an emotion not just felt by the characters, but wielded as a weapon against those who are deemed "different." (Review)

THE REVENANT (pictured below): Withheld too long from commercial release, D. Kerry Prior's crazily ambitious indie mashes up vampire/zombie tropes, buddy comedy, social satire and extreme bloodshed into a wildly entertaining ride-along with an undead Gulf War veteran turned LA vigilante.

Pic: © Paladin Lightning

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