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'January Is Hollywood's Very Own Leper Colony'

By Ty Burr

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Which came first: January or unbearably bad movies?

Consider these unmemorable releases from the past decade: “Tooth Fairy,” “Freedom Writers,” “Kangaroo Jack,” “My Bloody Valentine 3D,” “You Got Served,” “Snow Dogs,” “Are We There Yet?” Do they evoke anything in you beyond a migraine and memories of \$10 misspent? No, because they are January releases — and January is Hollywood’s very own leper colony, a hot zone of cinematic contagion.

This is hardly news; more like ontological fact. The Web site Vulture recently asked, “Just How Bad of a Movie Month Is January?” then tried to answer it scientifically; among the conclusions was that the worst January ever was January 1989, a month that included, fittingly, a terrible movie called “The January Man.”

Whether the typical January movie has been sitting on a shelf for years or is so instantly awful that its studio expels it like a foreign body, the general understanding is that these movies are the toxic byproducts of American filmmaking. Sure, some January movies do make money — “Paul Blart: Mall Cop” earned \$146 million in 2009 — even as everyone acknowledges they’re terrible. Many, if not most, die a dog’s death. Grosses of films released in January have averaged \$387 million over the past decade; compare that with annual average grosses for June releases (\$1.1 billion) and December (\$1.2 billion) over the same period. Even February — frozen, depressive, pass-the-Xanax February — averages \$615 million, a 60-percent leap over January.

Clearly there must be some larger purpose being served here. The January wasteland (and to a lesser extent its little brother, the August lull) turns out to have a number of useful functions for the film industry, for professional movie critics and for lay moviegoers.

Most obvious, the studios choose to dump substandard products here because they know our attention is elsewhere, as January has evolved into a time to watch the Important Films that were released in December. If the end of the year marks a

staging ground for the coming awards season — with various critics' groups, the Golden Globe nominations and the enigmatic body known as the National Board of Review serving as official starting guns — January is when most paying customers actually get to see those movies. January thus represents a convenient open playing field, and it gives Oscar aspirants like “Zero Dark Thirty,” “Lincoln” and “Les Misérables” ample room to stretch.

In fact, there's a long-established studio history of holding a prestige release until the very end of the calendar, with premieres in New York and L.A. in the final weeks of December to qualify for the Oscars, then rolling it out to the rest of the country in the new year. MGM did it with the Greta Garbo classic “Queen Christina” in 1933 and again with “Gone With the Wind” in 1939. Warner Brothers did it with Clint Eastwood's “Million Dollar Baby” in 2004, and Columbia Pictures is doing it this year with “Zero Dark Thirty.” The practice is the equivalent of a triumphant slam dunk in the final seconds, and it often wins the game.

So it's not as if there's *nothing* to see in January. It's just that the month has become, in terms of quality product, a time of catch-up. To studios and theater owners, it's December-plus.

But that's only half the story. For the six major studios that release commercial films, January is also a time to flush out the pipes and take whatever profits or write-offs they can get. Whatever you think of their overall intelligence as a species, studio executives often know when a movie isn't working as soon as they see the first cut. If it still isn't working by the final cut, they know when to release it.

Sometimes they get lucky and score a hit, as when audiences shelled out \$145 million for “Taken,” the 2009 thriller starring a butt-kicking Liam Neeson. More often, though, they get “Season of the Witch,” a 2011 Nicolas Cage medieval action-drama that returned \$25 million on a \$40 million budget. The marketing plan for a film like this is often just a formal wake, the last stop before a film's reincarnation as generic product for the on-demand/DVD/streaming after-markets.

To the dedicated moviegoer, it might feel — perhaps it should feel — as if the studios have given up on January. Because they have. But we don't have to follow suit. A new year offers new hope and fresh thinking.

There has to be a better way.

A question of teleology: Is the January cinematic boneyard a naturally occurring phenomenon or has it been developed by the studios, consciously or not, as part of the ebb and flow of their larger annual release patterns? During the great movie-factory era of the first half of the 20th century, when the studios owned the theaters in which they projected their wares, spring, summer and the post-Labor Day holiday season were, as now, the times when big movies were released.

Yet January was still in the mix. Silent-era Charlie Chaplin hits like “The Kid” (1921) and “The Circus” (1928), the Garbo/John Gilbert melodrama “Flesh and the Devil” (1927) and Josef von Sternberg’s “Last Command” (1928) all came out during the first month of the year. The 1940s saw such gold-plated January classics as Preston Sturges’s “Sullivan’s Travels” (1942), Alfred Hitchcock’s “Shadow of a Doubt” (1943) and John Huston’s “Treasure of the Sierra Madre” (1948). In 1940 alone, John Ford’s “Grapes of Wrath,” Howard Hawks’s “His Girl Friday” and Ernst Lubitsch’s “Shop Around the Corner” joined forces for what deserves to be enshrined as the Greatest January of All Time.

After that, not so much. With the breakdown of the studio system in the 1950s, release patterns began to clump more formally around big weekends, warmer weather and national holidays. Of the films on the Internet Movie Database’s “Top 250” list — a useful if occasionally insane ranking voted by the Web site’s registered members — only two post-1948 movies appear to have been released in January. They are “Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb” (1964) and — the grand exception to the January Movies Will Never Amount to Anything rule — “The Silence of the Lambs,” which opened in New York on Jan. 30, 1991, and went on to sweep the Academy Awards.

Still, Jan. 30? That’s February in all but name. And it’s worth noting that the rest of America didn’t get to see “Silence” until two weeks later. A proper January movie gets released to thousands of theaters at once — a studio’s way of gritting its teeth and ripping off the Band-Aid.

Anyway, “The Silence of the Lambs” was an aberration, because by 1991 the modern film industry’s release calendar was taking its modern shape. The studios had already discovered the summer blockbuster with “Jaws” in 1975 and “Star Wars” in 1977, and the late 1980s and early 1990s produced the coming of indie-film hardball players like Harvey Weinstein and Merchant-Ivory, guarantors of Oscar quality whose films staked out the available corners of the autumn awards race.

While the summer movie season begins earlier every year, all other aspects are now written in stone. Memorial Day through late July is for explosions, flying spandex men and C.G.I. critters. Labor Day through the end of the year offers films that are good for you. February through April is what the studios make of it. August is death by ennui. And January is suicide.

Well, there’s also Sundance. Robert Redford’s film festival, going strong in its third decade, has developed into a way for film-industry professionals and the media to keep the conversation going when it has all but ground to a halt amid lethargy and subzero weather. Deals are made and conversations are planted that will bloom later in the year, after the cultural topsoil has thawed. The Sundance Film Festival is basically the movie industry’s version of “Groundhog Day”: the promise that something better is coming, and hopefully it stars Bill Murray.

But for the 99.99 percent of moviegoers who can't take a week off to fly to Park City, Sundance is but a rumor of a sideshow. Something still needs to be done about January, and getting rid of it entirely and going straight to February isn't the answer.

I think we should simply declare the first month of the year a new-release-free zone. As a preliminary step toward regaining our trust, studios would have to rerelease their most underrated entertainments from the previous year for a second chance: 2012's sly meta-shrieker "The Cabin in the Woods," say, or the found-footage superhero movie "Chronicle."

As time goes on, January can be increasingly dedicated to the rediscovery of older films: get audiences out of the single-occupancy model for watching classics at home or on their computers and reconnect them with the joy of watching "Back to the Future" or "Rear Window" or "The Lady Eve" in a crowd, in a theater, as the movies were meant to be seen. If all else fails, the industry should adopt a blind-dart model, choosing one from the many independently produced labors of love made with credit cards and Kickstarter campaigns and opening it cold in 4,000 theaters. It can't be worse than what's already out there.

I realize these are a film geek's fancies, not to be taken as real-world business propositions. For one thing, this doesn't take into account the fact that the studios still have irregular inventory for which the nation's multiplexes function as natural clearance centers.

But in a sense, this is how my personal 2013 is starting out. I have a handful of vacation days to burn off, and I'm using the vast new world of set-top boxes and dedicated subscription movie services to investigate niches for which I rarely have time. Apple TV and Roku are my exhibitors, and "channels" like Hulu Plus and Fandor are my distributors. The other day I saw "Highway Patrolman" (1991), a lost classic from the director Alex Cox ("Repo Man"). I'm rewatching the silent French "Fantômas" crime serial — multichapter, paranoid-conspiracy thrillers decades ahead of their time. I've discovered the Criterion Collection on Hulu Plus, including the films the company hasn't yet released to DVD, like "Paris Nous Appartient," the impossible-to-find 1961 debut of the New Wave director Jacques Rivette.

Later I think I'll watch "Green Snake," a 1993 fantasy drama from the gonzo Hong Kong stylist Tsui Hark. Or maybe that three-hour documentary about Kraftwerk. Or a guilty pleasure like last year's Joseph Gordon-Levitt bike-messenger movie, "Premium Rush." Or "Les Misérables" — not the current musical adaptation but the 281-minute 1934 French dramatic version.

So let the studios release all the toxic sludge they want. I'm taking off the hazmat suit and making my own January.

Bonus Feature: Seven January Releases That Aren't Terrible

"The Kid" (1921): Chaplin's breakthrough fusion of gut-busting slapstick and heart-wrenching pathos.

"The Last Command" (1928): Emil Jannings won the first Best Actor Oscar as a czarist general reduced to working as a Hollywood extra. A Charlie Kaufman meta-movie decades ahead of schedule.

"The Shop Around the Corner" (1940): Forget the 1998 remake "You've Got Mail"; the achingly lovely Jimmy Stewart/Margaret Sullavan original is all you need.

"Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb" (1964): Kubrick's pitch-black nuclear farce started off 1964 with high style and doomsday paranoia.

"The Year of Living Dangerously" (1983): From Peter Weir, a sleek diplomatic thriller starring Sigourney Weaver and Mel Gibson back when they were the sexiest people alive.

"Blood Simple" (1985): Murder, stupidity, slick camerawork: the Coen brothers' debut has all their hallmarks in jaded miniature.

"Tremors" (1990): Giant carnivorous earthworms attack a desert town. A B-movie, sure, but a terrific one: funny, scary, and ingenious.