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THE BEDLAM FILES

With Adam Groves

“Don’t put limitations on yourself. Others will do that for you.”

— James Cameron

Streaming Now



1. THE KING OF COMEDY

The uncredited but quite evident template for JOKER (2019) was this now 40-year-old classic from director Martin Scorsese and star Robert De Niro. He plays Rupert Pupkin, a character that can be viewed as Travis Bickle’s nerdier, and scarier, brother--Rupert, unlike Travis, knows how to get what he wants, and what he wants is fame. His pursuit of it involves stalking, blackmail and the kidnapping of a TV star (Jerry Lewis, who admittedly played himself), yet through it all Rupert exhibits several attributes we’ve been taught to admire: he has an unwavering belief

Adam's Picks

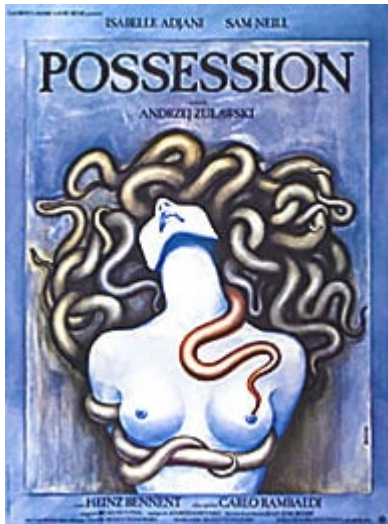


1. SZAMANKA

This 1996 Polish freak-out is something of a companion-piece to POSSESSION, made by the same director. I actually prefer SZAMANKA, as it has a focus and propulsion the earlier film lacked. Involved is a flighty and possibly insane young woman (Iwona Petry) who moves into an apartment owned by a randy anthropologist (Boguslaw Linda), and initiates a torrid affair; there’s also the mummified corpse of an ancient shaman, who in his day presided over a pagan atmosphere of death and insanity. It seems just such an atmosphere is infecting the

in himself and his talent, won't take no for an answer and isn't above making personal sacrifices to achieve his goals. This probably explains why the film has been so popular amid movie folk (such as JOKER'S director Todd Phillips), and why it continues to resonate.

HULU



2. POSSESSION

Many proclaim this the masterpiece of Poland's late Andrzej Zulawski. I'm not sure I agree, but do contend that this 1981 French-German co-production is a stunner. A lacerating vision of a marriage gone bad and the unimaginable chaos that results, POSSESSION features a Carlo Rambaldi created cucumber monster that impregnates Isabelle Adjani while her grief-stricken hubbie Sam Neil rages helplessly. Both protagonists are completely bonkers from the start and, unbelievably enough, only grow more so as the film progresses. Shot on location in a then-divided Berlin, inside cavernous, antiseptic interiors, this is a profound evocation of grief and insanity that's (nearly) as potent as any ever made.

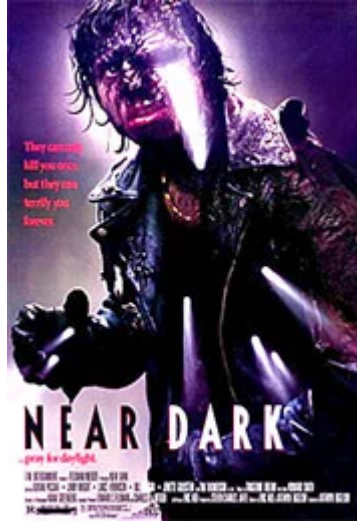
SHUDDER

protagonists, whose relationship grows increasingly sordid and perverse. The film contains all of Andrzej Zulawski's trademarks, from the unfettered mobile camerawork (it was the first of his films to utilize a Steadicam) to the seemingly epileptic performances and overall atmosphere of barely-contained hysteria. Cudos to Miss Petry, who largely dropped out of sight after completing SZAMANKA but has an amazing screen presence, with a smoldering eroticism and underlying menace that put most screen *femme fatales* to shame. FILM



2. DREAM SPECTRES: EXTREME UKIYO-E by JACK HUNTER

The first-ever English language book on *ukiyo-e* ("images from the floating world") and quite probably the definitive one, DREAM SPECTRES offers a user-friendly study of woodblock printed art from 18th and 19th Century Japan. *Ukiyo-e* was an evident forerunner of today's manga, as well as quite a few popular J-Horror motifs (notably the pasty woman with black hair of RINGU and THE GRUDGE, which apparently had its inception in a 1750 *ukiyo-e* painting by Maruyama Okyo). This book, as its subtitle makes clear, deals with the darker regions of the *ukiyo-e* movement, specifically the perverse and horrific aspects. Hundreds of *ukiyo-e* paintings are reproduced, encompassing spirited bloodletting, pre-20th century psychedelia and lyrical depictions of supernatural calamity. BOOK



3. NEAR DARK

You can't go wrong with **NEAR DARK**, the 1987 feature debut of Kathryn Bigelow (James Cameron's ex). It remains one of her finest films, a ferociously violent, visually evocative fever dream of vampire nomads loose in the American southwest. Obviously the film is no longer as fresh as it seemed back in '87 (not least because it's been so widely imitated), but the poetic charge bequeathed by Bigelow and cinematographer Adam Greenberg (another James Cameron cohort) remains distinct. Plus it contains an excellent turn by the late **Bill Paxton** (yet another Cameron ally) as an especially smart-assed vamp.

SHUDDER



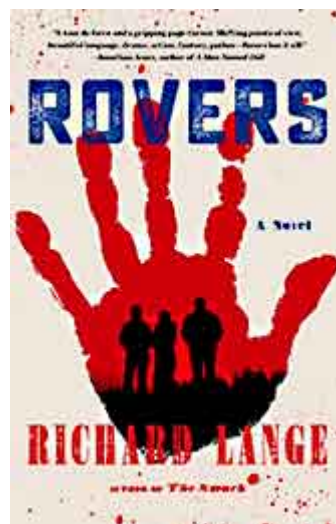
4. Q: THE WINGED SERPENT

A quirkier-than-average 1982 monster mash from the late **Larry Cohen**, one of Hollywood's most singular talents. With its engagingly nutty story, about a giant flying critter nesting in NYC's



3. CAPE FEAR

Scorsese and De Niro, together again! In this 1991 thriller, a remake of the similarly titled 1962 Gregory Peck-Robert Mitchum thriller, De Niro plays Max Cady, a psychotic rapist, and Nick Nolte the attorney who put Cady away by deliberately suppressing evidence. Upon getting released from prison Cady instigates a campaign of harassment against Nolte and his family, leading to an apocalyptic showdown on the appropriately named Cape Fear River. To my mind **CAPE FEAR** occupies the same place in the Scorsese pantheon as **THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST** and **KUNDUN**, it being, like them, an interesting but flawed experiment that saw the great man working outside his comfort zone. Yet Scorsese was fully engaged, turning out a film that's exciting, intense and startlingly brutal. **FILM**



4. ROVERS by RICHARD LANGE

Chrysler building, and endearingly tacky special effects, this is a monster movie in the classic American International Pictures mold--and no surprise, as AIP's late co-founder Sam Arkoff was an executive producer. Speaking of Arkoff, here's a famous snippet of a conversation he once had about Q with critic Rex Reed, who reportedly singled out "that great method performance by Michael Moriarty, right in the middle of all that dreck!" "Why thank you," Arkoff is said to have replied, "The dreck was my idea!"

SHUDDER



5. COPENHAGEN COWBOY

Truthfully I'm not entirely sure what to make of this Danish import. It's a six episode miniseries from director Nicolas Winding Refn, who was at his most affected. The program is VERY meticulous and protracted—read: *arty*—with lengthy scenes of actors assuming dramatic poses and staring into space as the camera *slooooooowly* circles around them. Yet there's a definite hypnotic flow for those willing to surrender to the show's hallucinatory aura; indulgent though he may be, Refn's gifts for staging and photography are undeniable. But to get back to the negatives: the story involves a diminutive young lady (Angela Bundalovic) who becomes a most unlikely hit woman, and embarks on an even more unlikely vengeance

Here's a prime example of media influenced by NEAR DARK: a 2021 novel that tracks a grungy assortment of wandering vampires in an action-oriented narrative that's equal parts Bram Stoker and Sam Peckinpah. Set in 1976, it features a band of bloodsucking "rovers," a man searching for the killer of his young son and a vampire biker gang, all caught up in an odyssey that begins in Arizona and concludes, quite bloodily, in Las Vegas. The prose is appropriately hard-bitten, the violence quite relentless and the characters much better drawn than those of most vampire fiction. There also exist passages of real tenderness and pathos, although those passages are, as you might guess, few and far between. BOOK



5. OLD ORDER by JONATHAN JANZ

A 2010 novella by Jonathan Janz, who in the succeeding years has gone on to become a potent force in the literary horror sphere. OLD ORDER offered a solid taste of what was to come in its highly atmospheric depiction of a thief who cons his way into the home of an eccentric rural family, and gets far more than he bargained for. You may argue that the outrageously dark and perverse climactic revelations are so out of left field they belong in an entirely different story. I'd counter-argue that weirdness and perversity were inherent all along, and simply allowed

crusade, with fight scenes that are so absurdly low-energy and unconvincing I wondered if Refn was aiming for comedy. If he was it didn't come off.

NETFLIX

to reach their full expression in the unforgettable final pages. BOOK

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Insider Info

As I write this James Cameron's AVATAR: THE WAY OF WATER has just passed the \$2 billion mark at the box office. This makes it the most lucrative theatrical release of 2022, and, given its trajectory, it may well replace its 2009 predecessor as the top grossing movie of all time. This is despite the paradoxical fact that THE WAY OF WATER, like the first AVATAR, hasn't generated much excitement. Don't believe me? Let's take a look at the AVATAR stats:



- **Online Enthusiasm:** *Low* (whenever the AVATARS are mentioned, it seems, they're mocked)
- **Enthusiastic Word-of-Mouth:** *Nil*
- **Passionate Defenders:** *None* (with the only defenses I've read focusing on the films' earnings rather than their content)

- **Viral Memes:** *None*
- **Quotable Dialogue:** *None*
- **Successful Multi-Media Spinoffs:** *None*
- **Enduring Controversies:** *None* (with the “Blueface” furor having fizzled pretty quickly)

Until this week I was certain those seven factors were crucial to any hugely successful movie release. They were certainly shared by previous Cameron films like **THE TERMINATOR**, **ALIENS**, **TERMINATOR 2: JUDGEMENT DAY**, **TITANIC** and even **TRUE LIES** (whose **Bill Paxton** uttered line “I’ve got a little dick!” actually gained some traction on the mid-nineties college circuit).

That leaves us with one James Cameron directed outlier (PIRANHA 2: THE SPAWNING aside): **THE ABYSS**, which didn’t inspire much enthusiasm in its initial 1989 release or its “Special Edition” re-release in 1993. How ironic, then, that it’s **THE ABYSS** the **AVATARS** most resemble. As with **THE ABYSS**, **AVATAR: THE WAY OF WATER** are uneven and tend to prize groundbreaking special effects over dramatic content, and, also like **THE ABYSS** (in its Special Edition version), the latter films are vastly overlong and preachy.

That audiences have so widely yet halfheartedly embraced **AVATAR** and its sequel can be interpreted as an unremarkable historical anomaly or something far more sinister. This is to say that the non-reaction to these monster hits would appear to confirm the widely spread belief that movie-going has returned to the form in which it began: a peepshow carnival attraction. That, it would seem, is precisely the status **AVATAR: THE WAY OF WATER** has assumed in the minds of audiences around the world, who passed over more resonant 2002 releases like **MAD GOD** and **EO** to experience Cameron’s peepshow. I hope they got a good eye-full.

Adam's recommendations organized by year/month in the **NEWSLETTER ARCHIVE**.



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The Bedlam Files, 1-2023

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