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# THE BEDLAM FILES

*With Adam Groves*

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“I guess I feel so tortured most of the time, when I see someone else feeling tortured, I get a little perverse glee out of it.”

— Tim Burton

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## Streaming Now

### 1. **MAY**



Lucky McKee made a smashing debut with this John Hughes-on-acid horror-fest. It’s about May (Angela Bettis), a severely disturbed young woman whose only friend is a creepy doll in a glass case; she seems fairly harmless until her dream guy (Jeremy Sisto) rejects her, causing May to snap completely and kill off everyone in sight. The film loses some of its razor-sharp focus in the scattershot third act, but redeems itself in the wrenching final shot. Best of all is the work of Bettis, who carries MAY with ease and assurance, delivering a true performance for the ages.

## Adam's Picks

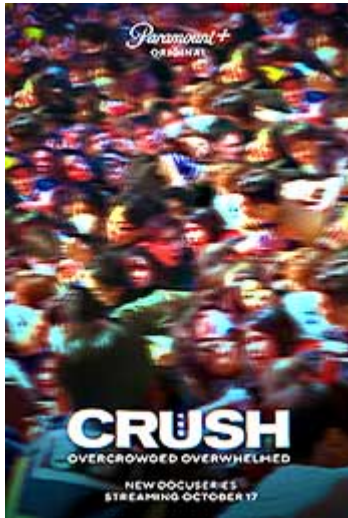
### 1. **DON'T LOOK NOW**



Just (re-)released on Blu-ray by the Criterion Collection, DON'T LOOK NOW (1973) is one of the seminal horror films. Adapted from a novella by Daphne Du Maurier, it’s about an American couple (Donald Sutherland and Julie Christie) who while on assignment in Venice find themselves haunted by psychic disturbances and an unseen killer. As presented by director Nicola Roeg, the film is a fragmented, schizophrenic and deeply disturbing evocation of a universe out of balance--and let’s not forget the Sutherland-Christie sex scene, one of the most justifiably

SHUDDER

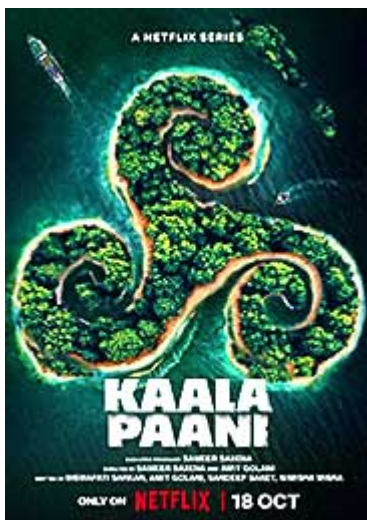
## 2. CRUSH



The need for government-mandated crowd control is effectively illustrated in this docuseries about the **Halloween night stampede** that occurred in South Korea last year. 159 people died in the melee, in which an impossible number of youngsters were jammed into a narrow alley, and relief was a long time coming. We hear from survivors, see extensive cell phone footage of the event and are inundated with political commentary that goes out of its way to pin the blame entirely on the government, which based on what we're shown may well be justified.

PARAMOUNT PLUS

## 3. KAALA PAANI



Think OUTBREAK (1995) reconfigured as an eight episode (thus far) Indian series. No, it's not particularly novel

celebrated non-hardcore couplings in film history, and the positively bone-chilling climax, arguably the most horrific since **PSYCHO**. FILM

## 2. EO



Another recently released Criterion must-own. Robert Bresson's AU HASARD BALTHAZAR (1966), which viewed human foibles through the eyes of a donkey, was the template for this film by Poland's Jerzy Skolimowski. Eo, a donkey, is depicted on an aimless odyssey through Europe, where he's caged, abused and made witness to all manner of atrocity. Skolimowski presents Eo's wanderings in a visually rapturous and oft-impressionistic manner; this donkey is prone to visions and hallucinations, at one point imagining himself a robot. Not all of it clicks, but so long as Skolimowski foregrounds his inert but quite soulful non-human protagonist the film registers as a unique, and uniquely touching, piece of work. FILM

## 3. COLD MOON OVER BABYLON

material (in cinema or reality), but pandemic drama turns out to work especially well in the Hindi language. The action in KAALA PAANI (BLACK WATER) centers on an infected lake that supplies water for a large city, leading to strife and espionage amid a well-acted cast of characters. My one major complaint: the best acted (by Bollywood TV veteran Mona Singh) and most interesting character is killed off in episode one!

NETFLIX

#### 4. THE RECIPE

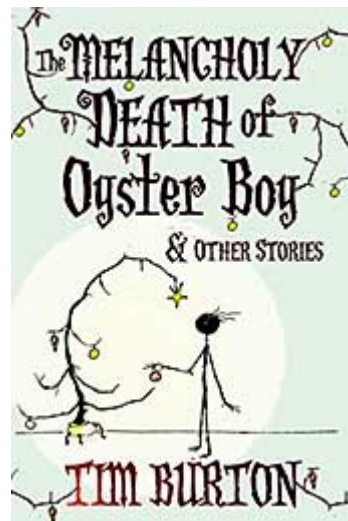


A most engaging and perverse 13 minute short, courtesy of the always enterprising **Alter** platform. In THE RECIPE, set in the 1970s (when Women's Liberation became a thing), a put-upon housewife (**THE HUMAN CENTIPEDE**'s Ashlynn Yennie) is devastated to learn her hubbie (Luke Barnett) has been cheating on her with a young floozie (Leah Grosjean). Yennie confronts Grosjean in a hotel room and later that night serves hubbie a special dinner. Figuring out the source of the meal's mystery meat is no big trick, but director Cameron Holly Dexter is far more interested in the wife's psychological state, as presented in a series of artful (and borderline surreal) set-pieces. I'm not entirely sure what to make of an oft-repeated interpretive dance performed by Grosjean, but Dexter's artistic choices are solid for



My favorite novel by the late Michael McDowell. It admittedly takes some time to get up to speed, laying out its southern backwoods setting and characters with a great deal of expansiveness. Yet McDowell's descriptive power and storytelling prowess assure that COLD MOON OVER BABYLON is never less than compulsively readable. The setting is a small Florida town where a tragedy-scarred farming family and a wealthy murderer reside, with McDowell's favorite theme, undead vengeance, utilized in a veritable joyride of supernatural mayhem. BOOK

#### 4. THE MELANCHOLY DEATH OF OYSTER BOY & OTHER STORIES



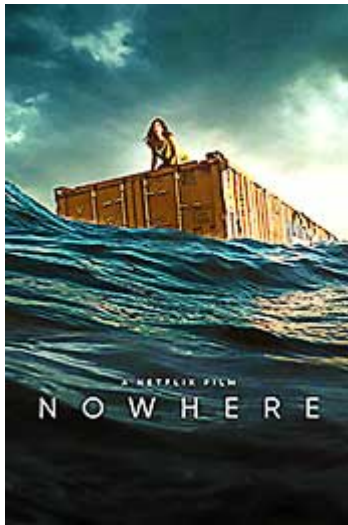
The macabre world of Tim Burton is superbly illuminated in this collection of poetry and drawings (alleged to have been ghost-written by Michael McDowell). THE MELANCHOLY DEATH OF OYSTER BOY may have been intended for children (nearly all its protagonists are kids), but Burton's



the most part, and Ms. Yennie is surprisingly moving in the lead role.

YOUTUBE

## 5. NOWHERE



A mostly effective exercise in confined drama, with a young pregnant woman (Anna Castillo) trapped in a shipping crate that ends up adrift on the Atlantic Ocean. Castillo is quite engaging, and the script displays great ingenuity in the assortment of goodies contained in the crate (such as masses of Tupperware and string) that she uses for sustenance. All this is captivating enough to nearly overcome the lousy opening scenes, depicting a futuristic dictatorship that's straight out of the dial-a-dystopia school, with fascistic overseers who are anti-woman, anti-infant and like to indiscriminately shoot people. The heroine's confinement in the crate actually seems like a step up, as in there, at least, nobody's shooting at her.

NETFLIX

(and McDowell's?) love of nastiness places it in a more mature category. There's "Stick Boy and Match Girl in Love," in which the wooden Stick Boy meets a horrific end, courtesy of Match Girl. "Staring Girl" can't stop staring at things, and so "gives her eyes a well-deserved rest" by popping them out of her head. Burton also demonstrates a knack for Edward Gorey-esque verse like "Life isn't easy for the Pin Cushion Queen. When she sits on her throne pins push through her spleen." And then there's the final page, in which the title character makes a concluding two-line appearance: "For Halloween, Oyster Boy decided to go as a human." Fun book! BOOK

## 5. THE LOST BOYS



I continue to insist this alleged "vampire classic" is overrated, but will concede that it has some good things, the luminous visuals of cinematographer Michael Chapman being first and foremost. Also, it's accrued a rather sizeable (as in: massive) following in recent years, so clearly there's something to THE LOST BOYS. Released in 1987, it was the film that launched "the Coreys" (thus partially justifying my dislike), and despite catering to a teenage audience was rated R. The eighties nostalgia factor, at least, ranks pretty high in this film. FILM

## Also New

- **BEETLEJUICE** (Film)
- **HALLOWEEN HORRORS** (Book)
- **HALLOWEEN 3: WHERE THE HELL IS MICHAEL MEYERS?** (Book)
- **JOHN CARPENTER: HALLOWEEN MAESTRO** (Commentary)
- **SLEEPY HOLLOW** (Film)
- **THE NIGHTMARE NEVER ENDS** (Film)
- **BUBBA HO-TEP AT 20** (Commentary)
- **Archived newsletters for easy reference**
- ***And Much More!***



## Insider Info

Tim Burton is an indisputably great director, and the man's collaborative spirit is crucial to his brilliance. The contributions of Danny Elfman (whose first-ever gig as a solo composer was on the Burton helmed PEE-WEE'S BIG ADVENTURE) have been widely noted, as have the production design of Bo Welch and the performances of Johnny Depp, Lisa Marie, Helena Bonham-Carter and Monica Bellucci. Another crucial Burton collaborator was the late Michael McDowell (1950-1999), a novelist, memorabilia collector (his collection of death-related ephemera was actually put on display by Chicago's Northwestern University) and screenwriter extraordinaire.



McDowell, according to Burton, "had a good, perverse sense of humor and darkness." That was proven by his many 1980s-era novels, and the screenplays (such as **TALES FROM THE DARKSIDE: THE MOVIE** and THINNER) to which in his final years he devoted himself fully. McDowell's premiere foray in the screen trade was **BEETLEJUICE** (1988), a self-proclaimed "feel-good movie about death" that became Burton's second feature. The script ended up being heavily rewritten (unsurprisingly, McDowell's original screenplay was said to have been much darker than the finished film), but that didn't stop Burton and

McDowell from becoming fast friends. They'd already collaborated on the ALFRED HITCHCOCK PRESENTS episode "The Jar," a Ray Bradbury adaptation broadcast in April 1986.

Burton was unhappy with how "The Jar" turned out, but BEETLEJUICE remains one of his signature achievements, a morbid yet kind-hearted PG-rated phantasmagoria. Its qualities are bolstered by the fact that McDowell worked with director Neil Jordan on the early stages of the script for HIGH SPIRITS (1988), which attempted a brand of comedic horror similar to that of BEETLEJUICE but didn't work at all. Clearly, Burton and McDowell's sensibilities were uniquely in synch.

The two collaborated again on the stop-motion wonder A NIGHTMARE BEFORE CHRISTMAS (1993), which despite having been directed by Henry Selick was another quintessentially Burtonish concoction. McDowell's script was once again heavily retooled, yet it once again provided Burton with an invaluable starting point.

There was also the 1997 collection **THE MELANCHOLY DEATH OF OYSTER BOY & OTHER STORIES**, to which Burton affixed his name but which is widely alleged to have been ghostwritten by McDowell. The book is everything we've come to think of as Burtonesque, an aesthetic McDowell was instrumental in creating (regardless of whether the rumors about his authorship are true).

An ironic coda to the Burton-McDowell saga occurred recently. Back in the day McDowell's novels, all of them paperback originals from the late 1970s and early 80s, were little known, while Burton attained near-legendary status among horror-fantasy connoisseurs the world over. Yet the recent trade paperback **reprintings of McDowell's work by Valancourt Books** have proven enormously popular, being the best-selling Valancourt books by far. I say this calls for a rebalancing of the Burton-McDowell dynamic, which should henceforward be known as McDowell-Burton.

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



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