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O'BRIEN, Shelley

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Nursery Crimes: Making a Case for *The Baby*

The 1970s was a particularly fruitful period for exploitation movies, many of which have gained a cult reputation. However, *The Baby* (released in 1973) is a peculiar, rarely seen, example of exploitation which deserves a larger audience. The subject matter is particularly uncomfortable – Ruth Roman plays the mother of two daughters, and a 21 year old son who has remained in an infantile state. A new social worker takes on the case, but after becoming attached to 'Baby', she becomes suspicious of the family's role in his condition. The film is rich with melodrama, perverted sexual overtones, brutal violence, and shocking twists – all key elements for a classic exploitation movie. This paper will examine the film in relation to its exploitative elements and situate it within the wider context of 1970s exploitation cinema. During this examination I will also put forward evidence which will present the case for *The Baby* as a “cult movie.”

Stephen Thrower, in his excellent book *Underground USA*, defines exploitation films as follows:

“an independently made non-studio film produced either a) to exploit the financial possibilities of a popular genre b) to respond quickly to current interest in a contemporary topic or c) to milk an existing market success. The term exploitation thus refers primarily to the intention to 'exploit' audience interest in a topic.”

Exploitation film can also be regarded as a type which usually aims to break taboos and to focus on lurid aspects such as sex, violence, the bizarre, and often bad taste imagery and subject matter. In the 1960s but especially in the 1970s, these lurid aspects tended to be the specific focus of promotional materials such as posters, which would include tag lines and art work which left little to the imagination. The tag lines for *The Baby* almost seem to be for a different film entirely, and yet they do conjure up a sense of apprehension about what we might witness upon viewing!

Horror is his formula!

Pray you don't learn the secret of... The Baby

Nothing in this nursery rhymes.

There shall be mayhem wherever he goes!

However, it is difficult to be able to state categorically that *The Baby* fits any of Thrower's three definitions of exploitation filmmaking, as little information is available on the pre-production of the film. Nonetheless, because the film can be labelled 'horror', in terms of some of its conventions and its distinctly weird and rather perverted subject matter, it seems reasonable to assume that the film was an attempt to exploit the financial possibilities of the horror genre. It is also no coincidence perhaps that the film was released in 1973. The 1970s is noted as a great period for American cinema generally but the horror genre in particular thrived, and as Thrower notes, "low budget horrors were imaginative, experimental and innovative". Early 1970s films such as *Last House on the Left*, *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, *It's Alive*, *Deathdream* and so on, are now regarded as popular culture classics due to their confrontational approach, their sub-textual significance in relation to cultural context, and also how they threw caution to the wind. Although it might be foolish to claim that *The Baby* has as much cultural significance as *Last House* or *Texas Chain Saw*, the film certainly deserves to be more widely known and noted as possibly having greater significance than has been allowed for so far. However, for the moment I want to concentrate on situating the film within the category of exploitation.

The film was produced by Abe and Milton Polsky, and Elliot Feinman for Studio Quintet Productions. The screenplay was written by Abe Polsky, who has not written anything particularly noteworthy before or since – a few episodes of TV series such as *The Virginian*, *Kung Fu* and *FAME*, and a film called *The Rebel Rousers* from 1970 which featured Jack Nicholson and was allegedly terrible! It was scored by Gerald Fried - who later collaborated with Quincy Jones on the Emmy Award winning score for *ROOTS* miniseries in 1977. The score is appropriately as strange as the characters who populate it – all low bowed cellos, tinkly glockenspiels, dissonant strings and

muted brass.

The director Ted Post is more famous for directing films such as *Magnum Force* starring Clint Eastwood (in the same year as *The Baby*) and *Beneath the Planet of the Apes*. According to IMDB's trivia page, in an interview with Post he said that he was reluctant to direct *The Baby* because he “found the dark premise too negative”. Although Post had some directing pedigree prior to *The Baby*, his stars were mostly bit part players, apart from a couple of notable exceptions – the husky-voiced Ruth Roman (who, earlier in her career, had starred in such films as Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train*, and *The Far Country* alongside James Stewart), and Marianna Hill (a character actress best known for numerous roles in TV series and films such as *High Plains Drifter* - again with Clint Eastwood – and the low-rent *Blood Beach*). Even Anjanette Comer, the other lead, was better known for her TV appearances - despite having starred as Miss Thanatogenous in the oddball 1965 film *The Loved One*. So far then, *The Baby* sounds rather unpromising, even with the inclusion of a middle-aged former Hollywood star in one of the lead roles. However, when we begin to consider what the film is about and some of the detail which is present, more of this exploitation jigsaw begins to fall into place.

In the 1970s censorship was relaxed and therefore as Thrower puts it “the gate to excess was thrown wide open”. Although the term exploitation can have rather negative connotations for some, often because of widespread inclusion of violence, nudity and sexual extremes – it can also be seen as allowing us access to a sort of alternative cinema to the mainstream. Indeed, this type of cinema which is often regarded as 'trash' has finally been reappraised and championed by certain writers (such as Jeffrey Sconce) who refer to it as 'paracinema'. *The Baby* may not have such excessive scenes of violence or sex as are evident in other films of the period, AND it even seems to have more in common with 1970s TV movies than cinema, but the overarching theme and several key scenes certainly qualify this film as exploitation, trash, or paracinema.

As noted earlier, the film revolves around a social worker, Ann Gentry (played by Comer). She takes on the odd case of a 21 year old man known simply as 'Baby' (billed as David Manzy here) who has remained in an infantile condition – crawling, crying, wearing diapers, drinking from a bottle, sitting in a high chair, and sleeping in a crib! Ann notes that she “made a special effort to get the assignment” and she becomes increasingly involved with 'Baby', his mother, Mrs Wadsworth (Roman), and two distinctly weird sisters, Germaine (Marianna Hill) and Alba. Although Ann seems to have Baby's best intentions at heart, it gradually becomes evident that she has plans of her own for him. All we know about Ann is that she lives with her mother-in-law Judith, and we have a suspicion that her husband, Roger, has been killed in an accident.

Now - if we consider exploitation in the ways I have outlined earlier, then the first evidence of this is the truly bizarre image of Baby himself. The sight of a grown man crawling around in diapers and behaving exactly like a baby is at best unsettling, but at worst it becomes extremely difficult to watch. When we see him being fed in a high chair, drinking from his bottle, and making baby noises (apparently overdubbed with the sounds of a real baby) it is strange enough, but there are a couple of scenes featuring Baby which make for very awkward viewing indeed. Exploitation films are often noted for trashing taboos and featuring scenes in bad taste as I have already mentioned. The prime example of this in *The Baby* is when Baby is left alone with a babysitter. When Baby starts to cry upstairs she goes to see what's wrong. Noticing that he has a wet diaper, she proceeds to change it – this is not shown in detail, but it certainly makes the viewer uncomfortable. Worse is yet to come however. The babysitter allows Baby out of his crib to play, but as he crawls around on the floor he bangs his head. As she comforts him, Baby proceeds to paw at her blouse. She says no at first and then she says “are you hungry?”, and ends up allowing Baby to suckle her breast! Again, this is not graphic and there are no close-ups for example, but the image is still deeply disturbing. On returning home, Mrs Wadsworth and the sisters go to check on Baby and discover the babysitter in this compromising situation. Here Roman explodes on the screen - “What the hell do you think

your doing?” Visibly terrified, the babysitter claims nothing happened, Roman spits back at her “With your damn tit in his mouth and you call that nothing happened?! You lying bitch!” She proceeds to slap the girl violently across the face and then beats her with a belt before yelling at the sisters to get her out. This scene not only features the frankly squirm-inducing sight of the babysitter seemingly becoming aroused by Baby's suckling, but also the sudden brutality of Mrs Wadsworth's attack – both aspects qualifying the film for inclusion in the exploitation category.

The second example which I want to refer to occurs a little after the babysitter sequence, and it is where we discover that Ann is correct in her assumptions that Baby is a victim of “negative reinforcement”. Ann returns again to the Wadsworth house and encourages Baby to play catch with a ball in an attempt to convince Mrs Wadsworth that he can be taught to stand, speak and so on. Baby is not able to perform even these basic skills however, and Mrs Wadsworth simply smirks, as if to say “I told you so” to Ann. When Ann leaves in disappointment, Mrs Wadsworth approaches Baby menacingly saying “Damn you...get inside!” Inside Baby's bedroom he is tortured by Alba – she attacks him with an electric cattle prod and gleefully repeats over and over “Baby doesn't walk and Baby doesn't talk and Baby doesn't stand. Baby doesn't walk and Baby doesn't talk to strangers!” She continues to assault him with the cattle prod until Germaine attempts to stop her. Mrs Wadsworth finally appears and she screams at Alba “He's your brother, not an animal – get him in the closet!” - simply replacing one form of torture with another! It is now obvious that Baby has been a victim of this “negative reinforcement” for his entire life. He is not physically or mentally incapable, he has been systematically abused into submission. The mere fact that Mrs Wadsworth at one point admits to Ann that he has never had a real name, he's always been “just Baby”, suggests a deep seated problem within the Wadsworth family. This is confirmed by a further perverse scene immediately after the torture, when Germaine is shown going into Baby's room at night, undressing and getting into the crib with him. We are not shown what happens, but the incestuous and exploitative nature of the relationship is all too evident. Ann later refers to the situation with Baby

and his family as having “been imprisoned by a kind of sick love.” She describes her understanding of the situation to a co-worker, saying “each child is by a different man and they all abandoned her. She's taking revenge on the only man in the family!”

It seems that this is indeed the case, and this explanation confirms that this is a film which is about exploitation as well as actually being an exploitation film, due to the way Baby's situation is presented!

The final sequence of events in which a completely unexpected twist occurs provide further evidence which supports making the case for *The Baby* as exploitation. Furthermore, it will lead me on to the consideration of the film as worthy of cult status. It is impossible to discuss the ending of the film without giving spoilers – for which I apologise. However, in order to present enough evidence for the case, this cannot be avoided.

After Mrs Wadsworth is tiring of Ann's interference she has her removed from the case. When Ann turns up at the house to question the decision, Mrs Wadsworth tells her to go away “You damn bitch!” A line delivered with absolute venom by Roman. It is becoming clear however, that Ann wants to keep hold of Baby at all costs, but at this point we are none the wiser as to why - assuming that she is just very concerned. However, when we see Ann at home with Judith things seem a little off-kilter. Foundations are being dug for a swimming pool, the house is quite grand and expensive looking (far more than a social worker salary could afford) and a shot of Judith in the kitchen framed carefully with a knife rack and meat cleaver, suggests that something here is not all as it seems. Out of the blue, Mrs Wadsworth phones saying that she was hasty and that Ann should come to Baby's birthday party, to see him interacting in a family situation. Ann accepts, not realising that she's being set up. During the party, Ann is drugged and taken to the cellar to be bound and gagged ready to be disposed of later. However, she manages to escape and takes Baby with her.

Ann eventually sends a letter and a photograph to Mrs Wadsworth saying that she is encouraging Baby to become a grown man claiming, "Your Baby is gone forever!" This spurs the Wadsworths into action and they determine to get him back. Arriving at Ann's house at night, Germaine and Alba sneak in to look for Baby. When they don't return, Mrs Wadsworth goes to find them. In a completely unexpected turn of events, she discovers Germaine on the landing with her throat cut and, shortly afterwards, Alba staggers from a room with a huge knife in her back. Suddenly, Ann appears brandishing a hatchet! There is a struggle and then pursuit. As Ann chases Mrs Wadsworth back up stairs, Judith appears with the meat cleaver that was so ominously positioned in shot earlier. Mrs Wadsworth falls over the bannister hurting her leg, but rather than allowing Judith to finish her off with the cleaver, Ann has other ideas. Ann and Judith appear crazed as they drag Mrs Wadsworth off to the pool foundations to be buried with the bodies of Germaine and Alba. She yells one last time "You murdering bitch!" before they gag her, and begin to bury her in the foundations.

Ann returns to the house, freeing Baby from a closet where she had imprisoned him earlier for crying, "Alright baby...had enough?" It is evident that there is no intention of allowing him to develop properly. Ann is continuing the job started by Mrs Wadsworth and it is all the more shocking when we discover why. The final scene reveals a room decorated for a child and we see another grown man in diapers with his head swathed in bandages. The twist is that Ann wanted Baby as a playmate for her husband Roger, not dead (as we suspected) but obviously brain damaged from an accident. The final shots are of the three of them playing happily in the finished swimming pool, as Judith looks on approvingly.

This ending further supports the case for the film as exploitation - in narrative terms Baby will continue to be exploited rather than be allowed to grow up, and also the image of two grown men in

diapers crawling like babies is certainly strange enough to merit inclusion in the field. It also furthers the case for *The Baby* being worthy of cult status.

Danny Peary notes that “when you speak of cult movies, you speak of extremes” and that “the word cult implies a minority”. *The Baby* can be said to easily fall into both of these categories – it certainly veers into extremes (as already noted) and it is a film only known by a minority. If we consider the reviews that are available via IMDB there are a total of 55 external reviews and only 43 user reviews. Most of these use the same sort of rhetoric when discussing the film – weird, twisted, sick, oddball, perverted, pleasantly bent, bizarre, unique, morbid, intense, a sleaze fest, an exploitation romp, trash art, “shocking and unsettling in breaking a number of social taboos”, and ultimately, “a fun, gonzo, cult flick”. This final user comment is not the only one which mentions the idea of cult in relation to *The Baby*. Many of the user reviews and external reviews use the term cult in their brief considerations of the film, but this seems to be taken as a given, rather than articulating the reasons behind labelling the film in this way. I have attempted to address this by looking in detail at some of the key scenes which not only make it exploitative, but also serve to position it as cult. Peary goes on to state that,

“All cult films differ radically from standard Hollywood films in that they characteristically feature atypical heroes and heroines; off-beat dialogue; surprising plot resolutions; highly original storylines; brave themes, often of a sexual or political nature; “definitive” performances by stars who have cult status; the novel handling of popular but stale genres.”

Does *The Baby* encompass some if not most of these elements? I would argue – yes. Different from standard Hollywood fare? Check. Surprising plot resolutions? Check. Highly original storylines? Check. Definitive performance by a star who has cult status? Check. As played by Ruth Roman, Mrs Wadsworth is brilliantly creepy and camp in equal measure. Her venomous delivery of dialogue, cynical posturing, and a wardrobe which features all-over denim, or garishly

patterned kaftans and red leather boots, combine to create a melodramatically over-the-top performance. In her obituary by William H. Honan in the New York Times (9/11/1999) Roman is referred to as having had “a pervasive air of wholesomeness” - suffice it to say, Honan does not mention *The Baby* or any of her other more 'unusual' film appearances, such as Curtis Harrington's *The Killing Kind* (also from 1973).

Finally, exploitation or cult movies are often able to present critiques of society in a sub-textual manner which is only able to be unpicked by certain individuals or small groups, and although, on the surface it might not seem that *The Baby* is handling 'brave themes of a sexual or political nature' it is worth noting that this is a film which is populated almost entirely by women. Women control and drive the narrative, and the only significant male in the film is exploited and controlled by women who have their own agenda. Ironically, this might lead to interpreting the film itself as a text of “negative reinforcement” which presents all women as exploiters who should be feared. However, it could also be read as the ultimate feminist response to years of patriarchal dominance. What could be perceived as more perversely empowering than not allowing a boy to develop into manhood, ergo never being able to become dominant male himself!

Whether or not either of these readings is convincing I will leave for discussion. The main purpose of this paper was to present evidence for *The Baby* as a film worthy of enduring cult status. Danny Peary states that “there is nothing more exciting than discovering you are not the only person obsessed with a picture critics hate, the public stays away from en masse, and film texts ignore.” *The Baby* has been ignored for the most part by critics, academics and audiences alike, yet it has numerous points of interest especially when considered within the broader context of 1970s exploitation cinema. I rest my case.

