

■ Forgotten film

Disregarded horror film is 'Alive' with social implications and style

A mutant baby goes on a killing spree through the city in this Cohen piece of pure pop-culture genius

BY RYAN NYBURG
PULSE EDITOR

Horror really is the most subversive genre, though this is more by the nature of the industry than any stylistic quirk. Horror films are so often mindless slaughterfests that nobody expects anything intelligent or sophisticated to come out of them. This probably explains the relatively poor reception of Larry Cohen's 1974 film, "It's Alive!" Nobody suspects a movie about a mutated killer baby to have anything interesting to say.

But Cohen is one of those rare talents who can turn the most bizarre or exploitative raw material into pure pop-culture genius. A low-budget auteur, Cohen had an eye for bizarre visuals and satirical imagery. He subverted the very genres he fed off of, creating allegories of American behavior from plots involving mutants, aliens and gun violence.

"It's Alive!" is Cohen's most disturbing work, both explicitly and implicitly. It opens with a family on the way to the hospital, the mother going into labor with her second child. Like any good horror film, everything is played subtly. You know this is going

to end badly somehow, the only question is when. Cohen keeps the suspense building, keeping everything light and low-key right up until the moment a doctor stumbles out of the delivery room and collapses to the floor, his face covered in blood.

After that, the plot kicks into high gear. The family has given birth to a small yellow freak that seems able to survive on its own only minutes after being born. It goes on a killing spree across the city, the LAPD in pursuit. Meanwhile the family breaks down under the pressure from the press and the community. The mother, understandably disturbed by the event, begins to lose touch with reality. The father is quietly fired from his PR job. He survives by disconnecting himself from the infant, claiming it is no relation of his.

The implications of this are powerful. Much like David Cronenberg's "The Brood," this is horror focused on the social unit of the family. The film depicts a monster that comes out of a family, as opposed to being created by larger societal forces. Along the way it also takes jabs at pharmaceutical companies, the press and

the medical establishment. In fact, though most of the film is told from the perspective of the father, the most sympathetic character in the film ends up being the mutant baby, which at least has an excuse for its depraved behavior.

Stylistically, the film is a grainy, poorly lit wonder. Its rawness adds a visceral quality to everything. The special effects are minimal, with the monster baby hardly ever making an on-screen appearance. This works in the film's favor because glimpsing the creature is so much more effective than having some rubber puppet jump out of the bushes.

The film's Los Angeles River conclusion is spooky and disturbing in a way most horror films only dream of. The final line leaves everything with that sense of existential apocalypse 1970s horror films were so good at inspiring.

Films such as this are tough to get away with these days. One would almost think that studios comb their horror film scripts for original ideas and remove them without haste. Most low budget films end up in the lowest common denominator utopia of direct-to-video land. That Cohen is still selling screenplays (he wrote

FILM, page 11

■ Film review

Pleasantly predictable film gets lost in travels through magic scenery

Undeveloped characters in the Himalayas tell the cliché story of "the grass is greener on the other side"

BY RYAN NYBURG
PULSE EDITOR

"Travellers and Magicians" is the first movie filmed in the Himalayan nation/kingdom of Bhutan and acts as an excellent travelogue of the country. Also, there is a story involved, though this sometimes gets lost in the self-consciously beautiful scenery.

The film tells the story of a government official in an obscure village. He spends his time bored out his mind and dreaming of moving to America. Finally he gets his chance and takes off. However, he misses his bus and must hitchhike across the winding roads, accompanied by fellow travelers. One of these is a Buddhist monk, who tells the story of a young man who falls in love with a older man's young wife. The monk's tale sits alongside the government official's travels, commenting on it through the juxtaposition.

All of this is shot in pleasant muted tones and plays out like a children's tale. In fact, the whole thing

feels more like it was meant for children, though it does deal with some adult themes. The characters rarely rise above caricature and can be summed up using nothing more than their titles: "The Drunk," "The Jealous Younger Brother," "The Wayward Youth," etc.

So while the film is easy on the eyes, it is also easy on the brain. The film spends more time laboring to make its point than it does developing its characters, causing the whole thing to come off as nothing more than a simple morality tale. And the point essentially boils down to "the grass is always greener on the other side," while also coming off as an argument against ambition and for the status quo.

This is all pastoral and pleasant, but why bother? It's all very much in line with the Buddhist philosophy yet is hardly engaging on a theological level. While simplicity is often a virtue and the plot's slow unraveling is a nice change of pace, nothing of

TRAVELLERS, page 11

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