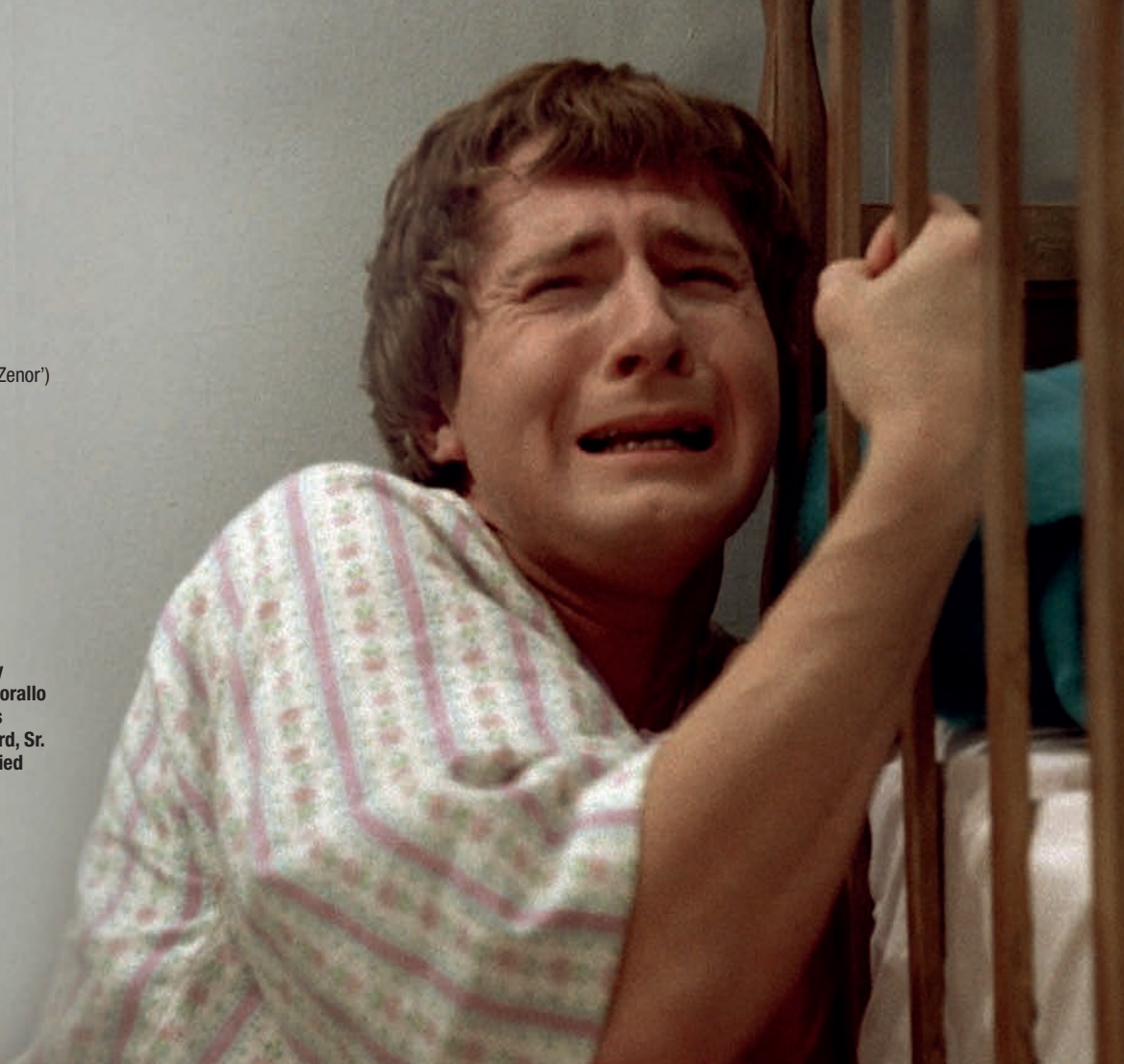


## CAST

**Anjanette Comer** as Ann Gentry  
**Ruth Roman** as Mrs. Wadsworth  
**Marianna Hill** as Germaine Wadsworth  
**Susanne Zenor** as Alba Wadsworth (as 'Suzanne Zenor')  
**Tod Andrews** as the Doctor  
**Michael Pataki** as Dennis  
**Beatrice Manley Blau** as Judith  
**David Mooney** as Baby (as 'David Manzy')

## CREW

Directed by **Ted Post**  
Written by **Abe Polsky**  
Produced by **Milton Polsky** and **Abe Polsky**  
Assistant Director & Production Manager **Jesse Corallo**  
Director of Photography **Michael Margulies**  
Edited by **Dick Wormell, A.C.E.** and **Bob Crawford, Sr.**  
Music Composed and Conducted by **Gerald Fried**





A woman with dark hair, wearing a purple long-sleeved dress, is seated and looking down at a young boy. She is applying a thick layer of white shaving cream to his face. The boy, with dark hair, is wearing a green shirt with a large silver bow tie and is looking up at her with an open mouth. In the background, there is a dark wooden cabinet with various bottles on top, including a bottle of J&B whisky and a glass of Coca-Cola. The lighting is warm and slightly dim, creating a domestic atmosphere.

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## A BOY'S BEST FRIEND IS HIS MOTHER: 'THE BABY', THE MONSTROUS MOTHER, AND SICKNESS WITHIN THE AMERICAN FAMILY

by Kat Ellinger

During the early-to-mid seventies a revolution happened in American horror film. Following George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* in 1968, the door opened for other small budget filmmakers to saturate the market with similar contemporary horror that reflected modern day fears. This resulted in the creation of a pocket of incredibly interesting films, many of which, even now, defy traditional classification when discussing their proper 'place' in the genre. It was within this niche that certain filmmakers were able to take a highly experimental approach to creating horror, resulting in all manner of weird and wonderful interpretations of the medium. And if there is one word which accurately describes director Ted Post's *The Baby* (1973), it is certainly 'weird'. It's a descriptor that crops up time and time again in response to the film. Even within a canon of similarly strange and outlandish films, *The Baby* is so odd, so difficult to classify, it takes the crown as one of the weirdest of them all. But despite this, it does follow some horror traditions. It also, like many of the other films to pour out of the American independent sector at this time, taps into the social landscape and associated fears of the period.

Throughout the seventies – just as Romero had done, and continued to do during this time – American independents actively tackled social subtext in their work: post-Vietnam, post-Manson family angst; the rise of pornography and permissiveness; cities falling into moral decay and crime as a result of a failing economy; a general sense of pessimism; the rise of feminism; and so on and so forth. *The Baby* addresses some of these concerns, especially in regard to feminism and male anxiety. But it does so in a way that appears so absurd that many struggle to interpret exactly where Post appears to be coming from. This is the filmmaker who has been credited with helping launch icon Clint Eastwood to stardom, directing him in his western *Hang 'em High* (1968) – when the actor returned from Italy where he had kickstarted his career by working with Sergio Leone – and later in *Dirty Harry* sequel *Magnum Force* (1973). Post made other mainstream pictures such as *Beneath the Planet of the Apes* (1970) and worked extensively in American television on popular shows like *Rawhide*. And yet, in *The Baby* he rejects mainstream convention to instead focus on the ultimate castration nightmare: where a grown man is infantilised by his mother and sisters and held prisoner in a state of perpetual dependence. Post's offbeat *The Harrod*







*Experiment* (1973) often gets a similar confused reaction to *The Baby*, for the way in which it takes on the subject of teen sexuality in voyeuristic fashion. However, these two films are generally considered anomalies in an otherwise conventional body of work.

Despite its obvious rejection of certain traditions, *The Baby* does borrow from an established literary institution. Perversion and dysfunction within the family unit are standard tropes found in Gothic horror literature. Gothic literary convention frequently uses plots which concern young women, who by today's standards would be classed as fully grown on the basis of age, but for the purposes of narrative formula are often presented as virginal and childlike in nature. It is usually the case that evil forces at play seek to keep these women in a state of innocence, and therefore ignorance, so that they remain powerless. This is a particular theme that recurs in the Radcliffian tradition of Gothic, which stems from the work of Ann Radcliffe and others who followed in her footsteps. In a bizarre reversal of this notion, Post's "Baby" is a man (portrayed brilliantly by David Mooney, who is credited as David Manzy). Whilst Baby's proclivity for breastfeeding takes on a slightly sinister tone in one scene, he is to all intents and purposes the 'maiden' of the piece. Post further subverts the trope in that, unlike the Gothic maiden, Baby is not allowed to develop into an adult through either marriage or escape from the family home. There can be no freedom or development for him. As one nightmare ends, another one begins. He remains powerless to do anything about it.

Despite the theme of family-based horror being such an integral and important part of Gothic literature, it wasn't until the latter part of the twentieth century that filmmakers started to get to grips with the idea in cinema in any meaningful way. When it finally took off, it did so at a rapid pace, following two distinct strands, both of which are evident in *The Baby*: horror through abuse at the hands of monstrous mothers, and sickness and dysfunction within the family unit as a whole.

Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) is one of the most important and influential films in the 'monstrous mothers' subgenre. It opened up the terrain for others to explore the impact of child abuse, dysfunctional mother/son relationships and other Freudian ways of thinking about horror. Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom*, released the same year, took a similar route, but by contrast focused on a male father figure as the abuser. Prior to this, filmmakers had dabbled with the theme of unhinged dangerous matriarchs through the hagsploitation genre. Although Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) is not a film typically regarded as belonging to this field, it set down a baton for others to pick up: namely by introducing the idea that older women can be monstrous and dangerous. This concept goes against the understanding that women, especially when they enter middle age and beyond, become increasingly frail and are therefore relatively powerless. It also defies the widely held belief

that women are naturally nurturing, caring and selfless. Hagsploitation forerunner, Robert Aldrich's *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962) – which shows a clear influence from Wilder in its showbiz connection – continues this theme but brings it into a family unit, where an aging woman – a has-been vaudeville star – abuses her wheelchair-bound physically weaker sister. Hammer horror's *Fanatic* (Silvio Narizzano, 1965 – aka *Die! Die! My Darling!*) – which intended to cash in on the success of Aldrich's film – focuses on an elderly puritanical woman, Mrs Trefoile (Tallulah Bankhead), who imprisons her dead son's fiancée, Patricia (Stephanie Powers), so the young woman may be shown the error of her wanton ways and be encouraged to adopt a more innocent and pure mode of living.

Forced innocence and dependence are key weapons in the monstrous mother's arsenal. For instance, Mrs Trefoile in *Fanatic* attempts to shame Patricia into submission. She denies Patricia access to her makeup and other 'grown-up' beauty accoutrements, puts her on enforced bible study sessions, with an emphasis on the evil nature of sex, and constantly resorts to demeaning the girl with the aim of making her see the error of her ways through disapproval and disgust. In Mrs Trefoile's world, men leave her because of their sexual urges, yet she doesn't see that men are to blame. For Mrs Trefoile, it's women. Tapping directly into the biblical line that Eve is the progenitor of all original sin, because she was the first to take the apple from the tree of knowledge, allowing herself to be seduced by Satan, only to then go on to corrupt Adam and therefore man, Mrs Trefoile, and others like her in horror film – women who have been left and deserted by their husbands, usually for another woman – believe the only way to keep their sons from leaving is to instil in them a deep-rooted fear of the opposite sex and adult relationships. Alfred Hitchcock continued this line of thinking in the relationship he portrayed between Norman and Mrs Bates. In *Psycho* we see another mother and son isolated from the wider world, where the matriarch, abandoned, is free to indoctrinate her son with a distrust of women, causing his psyche to shatter, and part of his personality to become so disgusted with his natural sexual urges, it forces the young man to kill.

*The Baby*'s Mrs Wadsworth (Ruth Roman) doesn't force Baby to kill. She has too much of a stronghold on him for that, and controls all interactions he has with the opposite sex. That doesn't stop him from responding to what is clearly a desire to have sex, even though he might not fully understand it. The scene where he suckles from his babysitter, which then takes a perverse turn, is the perfect illustration. When he is caught, it is the female babysitter that is blamed. Mrs Wadsworth and her daughters inflict a brutal punishment on the girl for her transgression, although Baby is also abused to further enforce the message. Just like Mrs Trefoile and Mrs Bates, Mrs Wadsworth has been abandoned by men. It seems that her treatment of Baby is linked to a desire to prevent him from leaving the family home, by making him completely dependent on her for his every need, but is also a way of





punishing men as a collective for the hurt they have caused her in the past. In effect, Mrs Wadsworth has completely castrated her son.

In this way, it could be argued that *The Baby* reflects anxieties of the time, where women were gaining far more independence than they had ever enjoyed in the past, in both the workplace and education, because of the progress made by the women's rights movement. As a result, traditional masculinity was challenged. The solidity of the family unit as a cornerstone of society was at risk of crumbling, and there was an increase in the rate of divorce during the post-war period, another factor explored in Post's film.

During the seventies the monstrous mother reigned supreme, as seen in films like *The Baby*, Brian De Palma's *Carrie* (1976) and David Cronenberg's *The Brood* (1979). What is exceptional about *The Baby* is that it takes the subject into extremely perverse territory and pushes the bar much further than many of its peers. It trades on the level of a sideshow spectacle, gloriously obscene in its focus on a grown man who can do nothing but crawl on the floor, chase balls and gibber like an infant. Post's world is dominated by women, and men are subjected to torture and subjugation. It is nightmarish and profane and nothing like anything else of its time or place.

Just as the mother figure took a prominent role in seventies horror, so too did the notion of 'the family' as a unit or institution. Flaws in the ideal were put under the microscope to inflict terror or disgust within the realm of genre film. For instance, absent fathers became a key theme during this period; take for example films such as *The Possession of Joel Delaney* (Waris Hussein, 1972), *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973) and the aforementioned *Carrie*. Cronenberg's *The Brood* focuses on a marriage breakdown. In *Rosemary's Baby*, a husband shatters his wife's illusion of the perfect family when he sells her body for personal gain to a satanic cult. *The Stepford Wives* (Bryan Forbes, 1975) sees men sell out their spouses in another way, by trading them in for more efficient models, while Romero's *Season of the Witch* (1972) gives dissatisfied housewives the power of witchcraft with which to fight back from a lifetime of enforced mundanity.

Within the sphere of horror cinema, again around this time, families also become the site for deviance to breed, which is another relevant theme for *The Baby*. Jack Hill's *Spider Baby* (1967) was a forerunner in this genre. Hill's film also tapped into the notion of grown adults kept in a state of perpetual childhood, though this wasn't through any kind of abuse but instead explained away through interbreeding and eugenics. Just a year after the release of *The Baby*, Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) became a phenomenal success, thus provoking an entire line of 'backwoods horror', whereby rural families are seen creating their own perverse and dangerous realities. This same sickness,

and manipulation of reality, is found in *The Baby*, although Mrs Wadsworth is slightly more in charge of her own faculties, and therefore more calculating, in contrast to the untamed barbaric and lunatic ensembles found in the likes of *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* and Wes Craven's *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977).

It's unfortunate, given the way *The Baby* not only channels the cultural climate of its era but reinvents and subverts popular tropes, that it has remained in relative obscurity when placed against many of its peers mentioned in this essay. Not only this, Post manages to navigate the subject of monstrous mothers and sickness within the family in some of the most challenging and innovative ways possible, pushing matters into distinctly Freudian, horrifying and perverse territory. Because of its weirdness, the film has become something of an outsider, in a genre ironically focused on outsiders. Today, with the benefit of hindsight, Post's message is slightly more obvious, making the film ripe for critical reappraisal. *The Baby* is a weird film, but that's exactly what makes it so special. Post may have had a relatively conventional career, but, as this horror film shows, when he was given the right subject matter, he could be anything but, even when working in an established tradition.

*Kat Ellinger is the Editor-in-Chief of Diabolique Magazine and co-host of their Daughters of Darkness and Hell's Bells podcasts.*







## ABOUT THE TRANSFER

*The Baby* was remastered in High Definition by Ignite Films from the original 35mm film and audio materials. The film was shot in full frame open-matte and is presented in both 1.78:1 and 1.33:1 aspect ratios with its original mono soundtrack.

## PRODUCTION CREDITS

Disc and booklet Produced By **Ewan Cant**  
Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert** and **Francesco Simeoni**  
Technical Producer **James White**  
QC Manager **Nora Mehenni**  
Blu-ray Authoring and Subtitling **The Engine House Media Services**  
Artwork by **The Twins of Evil**  
Design **Obviously Creative**

## SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Carl Daft, Stanley Dyrektor, David Gregory, Daniel Griffith,  
Bradley Steele Harding, Marianna Hill, Jim Kunz, Sigrid Larsen, Rebekah McKendry,  
Leroy Moore, Anthony Nield and Jim Kunz.





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