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The Single Take

Posted on [November 30, 2014](#)[December 2, 2014](#) by [Keith Uhlich](#)

The Babadook and Chilly Scenes of Winter

A great performance from Australian actress Essie Davis elevates writer-director Jennifer Kent's psychological horror film *The Babadook* (now playing), which otherwise comes off like too much of a calling-card first feature. I find showy subtlety especially irritating, and there's something about the portrayal of the eponymous bogeyman—a German expressionist shadow monster at some points, a gutturally groaning specter at others—that feels like a compromise between low-budget invention and self-aware intention. Kent knows she's got a killer metaphor: *The Babadook* is, all too clearly, a manifestation of the marrow-deep grief of Davis's Amelia, a

widowed mother who lost her husband in a car crash on the eve of their son's birth, and there's never a moment when the demon is onscreen that the filmmaker isn't pointing out the cleverness of the conceit.

That's not to say the movie lacks for creep factor, just that it frequently feels intellectualized to a fault, as if we were attending a discourse on "Allegory in Horror Cinema" with the professor occasionally shouting, "Boo!" from behind the lectern. A scene in which Amelia "feeds" the monster lacks the spine-tingling sensations that a meeting of mortal and supernatural minds *should* have because it's too focused on giving the Babadook a definitive symbolic shape. (Amelia must occasionally nourish her inner agonies or they will overwhelm her.) It's when the film settles into a more quotidian groove that it truly becomes affecting. At heart, this is a two-hander between a mother and a child. Davis and young Noah Wiseman (playing Amelia's morbid, aggravating progeny Samuel) build a rapport that is so genuine and mysterious it's almost a shame when the black-hatted beast intrudes to literalize their shared woes. It's enough to have the two of them just talking to each other, trying, and often failing, to connect through an all-consuming haze of heartache and despair.

Chilly Scenes of Winter

My friend Chris Wells programs an occasional series at IFC Center in Manhattan called "Celluloid Dreams," in which every movie shown is projected on 35mm. (Of the ongoing celluloid vs. digital debate, I personally maintain a hope, however tinged with ambivalence, that both formats can find common, coexistent ground.) For the most recent program, Chris presented Joan Micklin Silver's underseen dark romantic comedy *Chilly Scenes of Winter* (1979). In tone, this story (adapted from Ann Beattie's novel) of Utah civil servant Charles (John Heard) and his infatuation with his married coworker Laura (Mary Beth Hurt) reminded me of Irvin Kershner's marital discord melodrama *Loving* (1970). Both are incisive character studies of men and women, and both capture a certain middle-class American milieu with unshowy adroitness. The low-key aesthetic helps ground Charles' complicated obsession, which is very funny at certain times and frightening at others for his borderline psychosis. It's all of a piece: A slapstick bit of business in which Charles crashes his car into a tree in full view of Laura's husband coexists with the scene in which our agitated protagonist casually threatens Laura with rape while they have an otherwise banal argument (adding to the discomfort, it takes a very long moment for his words to fully register).

This isn't one of those movies for people who crave "likable" characters. Charles is an emotional mess, and there's nothing easy about the way Silver and Heard portray him. When he cons his way into Laura and her husband's home (he feigns interest in purchasing a residence similar to theirs), we're fully invested in his subversion even as we're horrified by it, and at no point does Silver suggest that any of his behaviors (good, bad

or in-between) trump another. That's being human: The positives and the negatives are all part of the package, and it takes a real artist to explore those complexities with such even-keeled insight. This is the kind of film that easily gets lost in the cracks, which is why I'm glad there are people like Chris committed to scouring the archives and uncovering those gems outside the immediately observable canon. It wouldn't be wrong to call *Chilly Scenes of Winter* 'slight,' but only in the sense that it isn't in any way attempting to get attention, as so much cinema does, by overselling itself. The aims are clear and the goals achieved (on every level) in full—the movie's mastery lies, quite simply, in its modesty.

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